

Social media and its impact on rheumatology

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Social media is having a profound impact on medicine, for better and worse.^[1] On the upside, social media provides means for engagement among clinicians, researchers, and patients. For many clinical conditions, research methods and results can be disseminated and discussed. Clinical experts can disseminate best knowledge and practices. Patients can engage with clinical expertise and healthcare systems that provide it.

There are also notable downsides to social media. Probably the major threat is the dissemination of misinformation. There are few means to distinguish between real and fraudulent science. Another concern for social media used for medical purposes is privacy, not only the direct revealing of personal information but also its collection, often unknown to the patient or clinician, by websites and applications.

Social media has found use in just about all areas of medicine, including rheumatology.^[2] A large majority of rheumatologists, along with their patients, are already using social media.^[3]

This special issue of *Rheumatology and Immunology Research* features a collection of papers on social media use, especially among the major international rheumatology professional associations, the American College of Rheumatology (ACR), the European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR), and the Asia Pacific League of Associations for Rheumatology (APLAR). These papers collectively demonstrate that social media can play an important role in disseminating clinical expertise, facilitating communication among researchers, and engaging with patients. They also highlight some of the pitfalls involved in widespread adoption of social media usage in medicine and the most effective ways in which to combat these.

Zamora^[4] reviews the benefits and challenges involved in adopting social media as a platform through which physicians can interact with patients to ensure their better education and empowerment. On the positive side, she notes the potential for educating patients about their rheumatologic conditions and engaging them through online communities. Yet she also notes the proliferation of misinformation on social media, as well as misunderstandings that may arise from postings taken out of context. These problems can be overcome by instituting a framework, which should be mandated at least in institutional scenarios, for ensuring that all individuals purporting to share medical information on social media have the requisite qualification and skillsets, and engage in transparent and accountable online behavior, especially in direct interactions with patients.

Alvarillo and Nikiphorou^[5] review the use of social media by rheumatology societies, sharing insights as well as lessons learned. They provide recommendations to enhance the value of social media for clinical rheumatology generally. They also note and provide advice on how social media can facilitate marketing and other forms of promotion of rheumatology societies and individuals within them.

Ali and Wincup^[6] discuss the rise of social media in rheumatology for research, collaboration, education, and patient engagement. With a focus on #RheumTwitter, they note how social media platforms, particularly Twitter, allow the dissemination and discussion of research findings. In particular, they describe the potential available for engaging patients in research discussion, although highlighting some of the pitfalls that may occur from misinterpretation of information or outright misinformation.

Coler-Reilly *et al.*^[7] present a narrative review on social media for research discourse, dissemination, and collaboration focused on rheumatology. They describe how many social platforms, especially Twitter, can facilitate

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research collaboration, clinician education, and patient engagement. They note other uses and social media platforms that can advance the development of clinical rheumatology.

Atukorale^[8] provides an overview of social media and results of a survey of members of the APLAR. The survey found that the most common platform for social media presences of APLAR associations was Facebook, followed by YouTube and Twitter. An even larger number of associations, although only three-fourths, had websites.

Lim^[9] provides a personal perspective on the use of Twitter in rheumatology. He noted his start in blogging and a gradual

transition to Twitter. He also provides some perspectives on pitfalls involved in the use of social media in medicine, including the potential for individual patients to get misled.

The papers in this special issue collectively describe the value involved in, as well as various concerns associated with, the use of social media among rheumatologists, rheumatology societies, researchers, patients, and others. While social media will never displace the relationship and direct communication with patients about their care, it will provide much other value for disseminating information, advancing research, and engaging with the public about rheumatologic diseases and their effective management.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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