A Brief Look at LinkedIn and Other Social Media Tools for Physicians

Chances are, you already use some kind of social networking tool. Perhaps you stay connected with family and friends through Facebook, or maybe you follow your favorite authors on Twitter, or you might be a frequent YouTube visitor. If so, then you’re already familiar with the pluses and minuses of instant communication tools that can connect you with anyone, anywhere, anytime.

For physicians and other medical professionals, an easy entry point to this world can be found through LinkedIn, a social media networking tool for professionals. Unlike Facebook, LinkedIn is used to communicate only your work-related experiences and achievements. If you think of your LinkedIn profile as a digital (but enhanced) form of your curriculum vitae, you’ll be on the right track. The difference, of course, is that your LinkedIn profile is available instantaneously to anyone. It also contains more than just data—links to papers you’ve published, for example—and it can include endorsements and recommendations from others. In some ways, LinkedIn and CVs are similar and different in the way that 3-D chess and the one-level board game are alike and different. Roughly the same elements, but quite a different game.

Creating a LinkedIn profile is surprisingly easy and doesn’t need to take more than an hour initially. Simply go to LinkedIn.com/reg/join, sign in and start populating the fields with data from your CV. At this point, you’ll be findable by those who enter key words into LinkedIn’s search box that match words found in your profile. Hence, recruiters who want to reach neurologists with your training will come upon you in their search. Likewise, employers and colleagues who enter your name into Google or some other universal search engine will be directed to your LinkedIn profile. At some point (perhaps immediately, if you have the time), you would be well advised to take more effort with your profile by developing a compelling initial statement, adding links or multimedia elements, collecting or giving recommendations and endorsements, etc. You can find advice on all of these points in numerous articles, webinars, and books, simply by typing the words “LinkedIn tutorial” or “How do I build a LinkedIn profile” into Google’s search box.

LinkedIn isn’t the only professional online networking tool for you to consider, although it may be the easiest to join and, with more than 330 million users, is almost certainly the most widely used. Another option developed just for the community of medical professionals is Doximity (Doximity.com). Billed by its creators as more than a social networking tool, Doximity allows the more than 300,000 physicians who use the site to securely exchange messages about patients as well as to stay in touch with colleagues.

If job search is your primary reason for being online, the best option of all might just be your AAN Career Center page, where you make the decision to make your profile public for recruiters to view depending on when you’re interested in looking at new job options. Because recruiters know the Academy has the most comprehensive database of neurologists worldwide, it’s a natural first stop for anyone seeking to hire in the field. Even if you’re not currently in a job search, it makes sense to create a profile in the database and choose the privacy settings to keep your information confidential, something LinkedIn and Doximity cannot offer. You alone choose when and if others can view your profile. To get started on this, go to Careers.AAN.com/jobseekers.

But don’t stop there. It’s tempting to assume that you can save time and trouble by simply abstaining from social media. Experts would caution that you do so at your own risk. That’s because physicians are likely to be rated or at least listed in multiple online resources as a service to individuals seeking care. That means you might discover your social media image has been launched for you, on sites such as RateMDs, Yelp, and Angie’s List. In most cases, the data on the sites will be neutral or positive, but occasionally you may find that you need to refute something that’s been written. If that happens, you’ll be grateful to have at least one professional profile already established so those searching your name online will encounter something you created yourself.
If you’d like more information and advice about this subject, one resource to investigate is Dr. Kevin Pho’s reference, “Establishing, Managing, and Protecting Your Online Reputation: A Social Media Guide for Physicians and Medical Practices,” 2013. It’s available on Amazon in print ($60) and as an eBook ($51) at Greenbranch.com. But be ready: Pho goes far beyond the basics of establishing a professional profile, into such territory as protecting/enhancing your online reputation, using multiple forms of social media to build your practice, and even responding to requests from mainstream media for medical expertise. As an internist, and the creator of the popular health blog KevinMD.com, he’s been down the social media road himself and can provide useful insights into how other physicians can make the most of this everexpanding transformation in the way medical providers communicate professionally. •