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Innovations in Diabetes Care

Diabetes Social Media: A Tool to Engage Patients



Manny Hernandez M Eng*

Co-Founder, Diabetes Hands Foundation, Berkeley, California, USA

Introduction

Social media has transformed the way we do everything. Diabetes management is no exception. In recent years, people with diabetes have taken by the millions to diabetes social networks and blogs as well as mainstream social media platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, to connect with their peers in ways that were impossible before.

Patients and caregivers read blogs like Kerri Sparling's SixUntilMe.com or Canada's own Barb Wagstaff's DiabetesAdvocacy.com; they participate in weekly chats on Twitter; they connect with others who refuse to wait for the diabetes technology they need today on the Facebook Nightscout group; and they learn from their peers in the TuDiabetes.org diabetes social network and the ChildrenWithDiabetes.com forum. These are examples of the outlets that have become a part of everyday life for a growing number of people touched by diabetes. But what draws them to open up about their diabetes lives?

The Benefits of Diabetes Social Media

Connecting with your peers and having an open dialogue about your experiences with this chronic condition make people start feeling understood and empowered and engage in a transformative way with their condition. This statement may sound like a hyperbole, but there are countless testimonials of people who speak of having been saved by the community they encountered through diabetes social media. Mike Hoskins, who has lived with type 1 diabetes since the age of 5, is one of them. He said, "At times, I still feel I don't want to do this. I have faced depression compounded by diabetes and I have found strength by tuning into friends' stories online. I know I can pull through."

When people with diabetes connect with their peers, they can learn from their experiences about recipes, device brands and diabetes options that may better fit their lifestyles. Also, patients who become empowered by social media connections become better advocates for themselves. A great deal of awareness surrounding latent autoimmune diabetes in adults (LADA) as a plausible diabetes diagnosis among adults has largely resulted from patient-advocacy efforts via social media.

Last, social media has made it possible for legions of patients to go beyond helping themselves, allowing them to have lasting impacts on the lives of others. An example of the impact of an engaged community of people touched by diabetes is the Spare a Rose, Save a Child campaign, which takes place every Valentine's Day. The Spare a Rose, Save a Child call to action is simple, which makes it ideal for social media: on Valentine's Day, buy fewer roses and share the value of those flowers with a child with diabetes in the developing world. In 2014, the campaign raised nearly \$30,000 for International Diabetes Federation's Life For a Child program, giving a year of life to almost 500 children with type 1 diabetes!

How can healthcare providers use diabetes social media as a tool to help patients? Healthcare providers face increased pressure, having to deal with more patients and complete more paperwork in the same amount of time and, in many cases, getting reimbursed less. In the end, the average person with diabetes spends at most 0.1% of their lives in the course of an entire year discussing health matters with a healthcare provider, and we're collectively losing the battle on diabetes.

In the midst of this reality, diabetes social media becomes a tool healthcare providers can recommend to their patients to help them with their diabetes management. With social media, patients get at least 2 critical things physicians can't normally offer: the perspective from the point of view of another patient and an almost unlimited amount of time to listen and share experiences. In turn, healthcare providers can add to their education and empathy toward patients by reading articles written in the patients' voices.

Hope Warshaw, one of the most recognized Certified Diabetes Educators in the United States, regularly encourages the people with diabetes she works with to connect with their peers online to learn, share and get and give support. She created a guide to serve as a starting point for healthcare providers wanting to get more comfortable with diabetes social media, to recommend it to their patients: <http://www.hopewarshaw.com/connectdiabetes>.

Over time, new technologies are likely to emerge and, with them, new and creative ways for patients to connect will become available. But regardless of the technology powering it, now that you have a sense of what is possible when patients connect with one another, we should make sure that *nobody* with diabetes ever feels alone anymore.

* Address for correspondence: Manny Hernandez, M Eng, Diabetes Hands Foundation, 1962 University Ave, #1, Berkeley, CA 94704, USA.

E-mail address: manuel@askmanny.com