

MANAGEMENT CONUNDRUM

Tweeting? Pause For Thought!

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Janet Donit, Chief Pharmacist of Metropolis NHS Trust. "I've just been on Twitter and one of my pharmacists who is at a 'Better Care' conference has just tweeted that staff cutbacks in our hospital are putting patient care at risk!"

"Steady on", said Carey Whitecoat, the Head of Medicines Optimisation at Riverdale Primary Care Organisation, "you don't need to get so riled up. They've only summarised what was in the press recently about the NHS generally."

"That's not the point," said Janet getting even more agitated. "He's linked it to Metropolis NHS Trust and given the impression that patient care is not what it should be. What must people think!"

"I see what you mean," conceded Janet "but it could have been worse. There are a lot of risks with social media – it's a real minefield. And it's not just an organisation's reputation that's at risk – just think about patient confidentiality."

"I dread to think what a disgruntled member of staff might do!" said Janet, who was getting more concerned. "They could be disciplined but by then it would be too late. The damage would have been done!"

"OK", said Carey thoughtfully. "We're experienced in managing risk and I'm sure we can do that here. Social media is here to stay so we might as well get used to it. We need to be clear about the risks and how they can be managed."

Can you help Janet and Carey? What are the main risks inherent in the use of social media and how can these be managed?

Commentaries



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Social media truly is a double edged sword! The potential to share information in real time along with opportunities to debate that information make social media a powerful tool. However, the risks it poses to individuals

and organisations must be managed.

In the not too distant past the pharmacist in this scenario may have had a similar conversation but over dinner or a drink and, crucially, to a small circle of friends and colleagues. Moving forward, this individual needs to understand that anything posted on most social media sites is not just seen by their colleagues/friends but anyone across the world. In this scenario it may well be that the local or national press pick up on this and develop a story that is in no way

reflective of the real situation at Metropolis NHS Trust.

Beyond organisational reputation, there are other risks associated with social media that organisations need to consider. These include data leakage (releasing embargoed or confidential data), sharing messages that are at odds with the Trust's vision or mission statement, posting defamatory comments about organisations and individuals that the Trust does business with and revealing sensitive information about

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Something posted on a social media site could be seen by anyone across the world

patients. Furthermore, individuals may also be put at risk: cases of workplace bullying using Facebook and Twitter, accounts being hacked and reputation (future employees may look at your Facebook page or Twitter feed!).

There are millions of social media users across the UK (Twitter has over 15m users in the UK) so rather than banning or controlling access to these sites, what is needed is a shift in organisational culture

so that staff are empowered to use social media responsibly. Trusts are already using social media to share information on successes (e.g. awards, publications, advertise for new staff/services and, more recently, to start engaging with patients and their families.

NHS organisations need social media policies backed up with training, guidance and leadership. Individuals need a good dose of common sense; if you

don't want the world to read it then don't tweet it!

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The impersonality of emails and the ability to ‘fire one off’ immediately to a number of people at the same time was the beginning of the drift towards unconsidered communication. The immediacy and span of social media, particularly Twitter, has definitely increased the risk for both the individual and the organisation they may represent, even if unintentionally. There are particular risks when individuals find themselves in an environment where their emotions are stirred and the use of Twitter is being encouraged. Individual and organisational risks go beyond Twitter though. The actions of individuals outside work can appear on social media, either with or without their knowledge, and photos of inappropriate behaviour by a pharmacist on a ‘stag’ or ‘hen’ do can undermine their professional standing.

It is impossible to stop individuals using social media and eliminate the risks of appearing in photographs taken and posted by others. I would, therefore, recommend that two approaches are taken to minimise the risks to the individual and the organisation:

- Provide all staff with guidance on the risks to their reputation and possible careers if they post tweets or other material on social media in haste that they may regret later, as once posted it can be too late. This advice may include examples of particularly risky situations, e.g. being at a conference when emotions and the environment



Do you really want to press ‘Send’?

may promote rash decisions or being in a social situation with people you don’t know well.

- Make it clear to all staff that they are positively encouraged to raise concerns about patient safety with their line manager, whether due to organisational weaknesses or individual competence of other staff. If they feel uncomfortable raising it with their own line manager they must also not feel afraid to raise it another senior staff instead. Line managers must feel confident that if they cannot address someone’s concerns, their own line manager will take on the concerns, with the head of the service ultimately being willing to deal with any issues raised. The head of service also needs to be confident that the organisation will act.

If staff see their concerns are being addressed either by being provided with acceptable information to allay their concerns or action being taken to address real weaknesses, this should help minimise the risk that staff feel they need to ‘go public’, even if unintentionally, with their concerns.

Declaration of interests

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Ray Lyon

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