SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS

Study: the power of social media to improve patient experience and quality

Experts say hospitals that put forth a half-hearted social strategy are sending the wrong signal to current and potential consumers

With the proliferation of social media sites like Twitter, everyone has become a critic, creating troves of publicly available, untapped information about hospital performance just waiting to be mined.

With that notion in mind, researchers at Boston Children’s Hospital recently set about trying to make sense of tens of thousands of tweets sent to the Twitter handles of U.S. hospitals. They found all sorts of useful tidbits about what patients are seeing and hearing during their hospital visits, along with a tangible connection between whether a hospital has a Twitter presence, and how the general public perceives it. About one in five adults actively use Twitter presence, and how the general public considers it. About one in five adults actively use Twitter presence, and how the general public perceives it. About one in five adults actively use the microblogging site, authors note, and each American hospital receives about 43 tweets a year related to the patient experience.

Information from satisfaction surveys sometimes can take ages to disperse widely, and social media offers hospitals added real-time information on public sentiment, says Jared Hawkins, M.D., an author of the study and director of informatics in Boston Children’s innovation program. Hospitals have long been using social media as a marketing tool, but it’s time they harnessed its untapped potential to improve patient care.

“No one is doing it systematically across their patient population and trying to get a sense of how they’re doing, much like with other traditional surveys,” Hawkins says. “I think that this is going to continue to be an increasingly valuable data stream. It will never replace those surveys; that’s not the way to look at it, but rather, it will complement them.”

Boston Children’s experts gathered some 404,000 publicly viewable tweets directed at the 50 percent of U.S. hospitals with a Twitter account over a one-year period. Sifting through the data, they found about 9.4 percent pertained to the patient experience — interactions with staff, hospital environment, mistakes in treatment, etc. Authors then compared that information with government consumer health care surveys and data on readmission rates, searching for a connection.

Bottom line, researchers found a slight correlation between whether hospitals have a Twitter account and how they perform on HCAHPS surveys, and a weak association between public sentiment on Twitter and 30-day readmission rates. One takeaway for hospital leaders, Hawkins notes, is the importance of maintaining a unique individual handle for each of a health system’s hospitals, and monitoring feedback on such channels for insights.

Researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital similarly analyzed patient ratings of hospitals on Facebook and found that the higher the star rating, the lower the readmission rate. Up next, they hope to explore how ratings on Facebook — and possibly other sites such as Yelp or Google Plus — correlate with further quality indicators.

Garry Choy, M.D., a radiologist and author of the Facebook study, believes those hospital strategists who put little or no effort into social media run the risk of appearing inaccessible, technologically challenged or, worse yet, apathetic to the public. Other industries, such as aviation, have long used social media to better understand their customers, and hospital leaders should keep an eye toward whatever may be next.

‘One thing to keep in mind: Social media is just an example of one new data source today. Tomorrow, there will be others,” says Choy, who is also an assistant chief medical information officer at Mass General. “For health care to stay on the cutting edge and be able to respond to patients, we have to keep in mind: What is after social media? What’s beyond?’ “

SAMPLE PATIENT TWEETS

Here are a few of the sentiments patients shared with hospitals across the country during the one-year study period ending September 2013. Authors of the Boston Children’s study have compiled tweets directed at U.S. hospitals at www.crowdclinical.com, searchable by the institution’s name.

“I’m thankful for the [hospital], their staff, my Doctors and to be treated as a person, not just a patient.”

“ skipped dinner last night because of your terrible cafeteria food. Are you trying to get more patients? #eathealthy #healthcare”

“what do you have against coat hooks? 3 exam rooms, 2 locations in 1 day and not a place to hang my coat and bag!”

“12 hrs in the ER... not good [hospital]. My father is just now getting a room. #notgoodenough #er #getitright”