

# Using social networks in oncology: Is it justifiable??

Sir,

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, Internet and social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become the major communication mediums for people, especially the younger generation. This drastic transformation in communication methods can be applied on changing the doctor-patient relationship,<sup>[1]</sup> making it difficult to keep their personal and professional lives separate.

Cancer patients have a high risk of getting isolated and deprived from peer interaction. By using the social networking tools, patients remain in touch with their friends and relatives for required psychological support and stimulus. They can also communicate with other cancer patients and health care professionals by using these social networks to get any information. It is easier for cancer patients to make peer groups on these networks, with other patients outside their geographical territory.

Using social networks can decrease the patients' hopelessness and apprehensions regarding their disease and life, but it can carry risks too. Patients may exchange and share information about their unfavorable course of the disease, misunderstanding or misinterpreting required investigations, cancer management, and treatment protocols. They can also announce a patient's death. There is generally no way to filter such information, thus disease and death become public events. Some patients do not need to know about their unfavorable disease outcomes to avoid the risk of identify them as "the next number." This increases the chances of the patients or their family members using Facebook or WhatsApp to get clinical opinion and treatment recommendations outside the appropriate institutional settings. Then there is the issue of treating health care professionals' privacy.

Social networks have been useful for the health care professionals to take corrective action (personal interviews or group discussions) to restrict the circulation of misleading or inappropriate information as well as better care and

management of the patients' clinical and psychological issues. Social networks also serve as a platform for communication between cancer patients or their family members and dedicated professionals such as oncologists, psychologists, social workers, and teachers. Oncologists may use social network as a platform for patient education and health messaging for professional development, knowledge sharing, and direct patient interaction.<sup>[2]</sup>

In short, despite the related risks, social networks could be a valuable medium in oncology for cancer patients as well as oncologists for a better care and management of the cancer. But these networks should be used to sustain, not to supplant face-to-face personal interactions.

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