**Ethical issues in sharing patients’ information in social media**

Use of social media is consistently increasing across the world including India. (1,2) Some of the popular social medias include Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, google plus etc. Commonly there are different groups who use to share information of different kinds. Medical professionals also use these media like others. Sharing personal information including photos are well accepted but when it comes about sharing information related to patients, question arises whether it breeches the ethical boundary. Several incidents are there in the European and American countries where medical students or practitioners got punishments while sharing photo in facebook. In 2008, a Swedish nurse was suspended from her job as she posted brain surgery photo in facebook. (3) In 2011, four nursing students in US were expelled from their college for posting a photo in facebook posing with human placenta. (4) A Mexican anaesthetist was fired from her hospital in 2012 for posting several photos where face of the patient was visible with degrading comment. (5) The case is not the same in India. There is a common habit of posting patients photos and information without any clear interest. For instance a doctor had to apologize to a patient who was suffering from cardiac tumor, as the doctor uploaded photo of organs of the patient in facebook. (6)

Confidentiality of a patient is of utmost importance. Both the treating physician and the institution should play a sensible role towards it. Patients’ data including photographs are shared mainly for two reasons. First, the primary use where a doctor can seek medical advice or expert opinion from other physician/s which is ideally for the betterment of the patient. The second one is secondary use where patients’ information is used purely for educational purpose. (7) For example a rare clinical finding or radiological snapshot can be shared among the students. Irrespective of the use, anonymity of the patients should be maintained with a proper informed consent. The other use, i.e. posting photos in facebook, probably to impress others, is nothing but an unhealthy practice. Often people argue that the name is withheld and thereby anonymity is maintained which is not true. We should also remember that any time a photo can be shared and disseminated without the knowledge of the person who has posted it. It violates the right of the patient whatever may be the intention of the treating physicians or medical students. Moreover a photograph or misleading message with insensible comments are potentially dangerous and far from any healthy objectives.

Currently we don’t have a rule in India toward preventing and practicing such kind of act. We opine to teach the students of all medical professionals about the ethical issues in day to day practice by incorporating medical ethics in curriculum. A good institutional policy to keep the records of the patients safely preventing unnecessary use of data may be helpful. The same applies for the private practitioners as well.

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