# Pain relief for the Twittering Classes

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**In the new NHS, you are what you tweet** *Health Service Journal, 9 Aug 2012*

Joe McCrea the author of the article in the Health Service Journal and a former advisor to the 10 Downing Street Policy Unit went on to state that *“Social media is no longer optional but an essential tool that must be used”*. This view has been echoed by theIMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics whose report in 2014 states that *“The emergence of the engaged patient has demonstrated the increased importance of social media in the broader healthcare context”*. Our presentation will outline the experience of our in-patient pain management service in introducing this ‘essential tool’ and reflect on what we have learnt.

**What is Social Media?**

Social media is a generic term used to describe a range of online applications that encourages users to take part in interactive communication. This makes it a particularly useful vehicle both for informing patients and for gaining their feedback and can provide a direct way to achieve patient engagement. Social media use is dominated by the “Big 4” of Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube which serve complementary purposes in different ways. However the most useful social media platforms for patient engagement are:

**Facebook:** The most popular platform. Facebook claims to have more than ~850m users worldwide.

**Twitter:** A vast, web-based messaging network; more like texting than emailing. Each tweet is a single message up to140 characters long. Twitter is best used via a separate dashboard application that acts in a similar way to a web browser, enabling the user to monitor responses to messages, subjects of interest and mentions (retweets) you get.

**Blogs:** Originally called web-logs, and now shortened to blogs. Blogs can be a useful tool for interaction with patients, offering them the chance to comment on their care.

**Forums:** Often overlooked in favour of more glamorous platforms. Forums are generally based around a specific subject area and work on a question-and-answer format. They can be powerful tools for patient participation.

**Social Media in Healthcare**

It used to be sufficient just to have a website. However, NHS organisations now realise that as part of a comprehensive communications strategy they must have an internet presence which should include social media. The advantages of social media for patient care are that:

* It facilitates interaction with a wide range of patients, including those who usually do not engage,
* The technology is now so widespread that views can be sought and fed back within days
* It enables greater individual patient (and carer) involvement in treatment
* It is much less resource-intensive than traditional engagement techniques

It is possible that social media may improve outcomes in the long term but it won’t reduce costs.

**Using Social Media**

It is important to have a plan of what you are trying to achieve, whom you are targeting, with what messages and how you will respond to what flows back to you. To engage successfully using social media, requires more than simply setting up a Facebook page or get on Twitter. So before starting be clear about:

* What you are trying to tell people
* What you want them to tell you
* How you will handle what you learn.

Social media use is not an end in itself, even though it represents a big culture change. Also traditional forms of engagement will still be necessary for patients who do not routinely use electronic media.

Once set up always communicate in a professional manner and don’t say things on a social media network that you wouldn’t say in front of your colleagues! Social media is a public environment and rules on patient confidentiality should reflect this. Avoid the temptation to “broadcast”; ie using social media as little more than a reformatted press release delivered to passive recipients. Instead use it as a means of supporting communities of patients by engaging, listening and responding to them. Finally social media is an ongoing commitment and active management and moderation of all platforms is necessary otherwise patients will quickly leave.

**The Plug!**

Want to see how we have got on?

@StGManageMyPain (twitter)

@StGPainTeam (twitter)

St George’s Hospital Pain Team (Facebook)

**Further Reading**

1. Engaging patients through social media. Report by the IMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics. January 2014. [www.imshealth.com](http://www.imshealth.com)
2. A Social Media Toolkit for the NHS. NHS Employers 2014. <http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/a-social-media-toolkit-for-the-nhs>
3. How to twitter for business success. Nicky Kriel, 2013. [www.otherpublishingcompany.com](http://www.otherpublishingcompany.com)