

Why They Blog: Healthcare Providers Are Embracing Blogs; Should You Join Them?

By Fard Johnmar

There's no doubt about it, blogs are big. According to blog-tracking firm Technorati, there are more than 50 million blogs globally, and an average of two blogs are created every second.¹ In addition, thousands of people read popular blogs, like Steve Rubel's Micro Persuasion (www.micropersuasion.com), each day. Rubel and other top-notch bloggers are quoted regularly in prominent publications such as *Business Week* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

With all of the buzz surrounding blogs, it was only a matter of time before physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and other healthcare providers decided to enter the blogosphere in large numbers. Over the past few years, hundreds, if not thousands, of medical professionals have started blogs. While there are no firm statistics on how many healthcare providers are writing blogs around the world, the Pew Internet & American Life Project estimates that about 1%, or 120,000 US bloggers, focus on health-related topics.² Some physicians, such as the anonymous blogger "Sydney Smith" of Medpundit (<http://medpundit.blogspot.com>), have become minor online celebrities and developed dedicated, passionate audiences.

Despite the popularity of blogs, not everything is rosy in the blogosphere. For example, many blogs are short-lived and little seen. According to a 2003 Perseus Development Corporation study, the majority of blogs have small audiences and are quickly shuttered.³ In addition, only about 40% of American adults read blogs.²

So, what motivates healthcare providers to blog? Should you join the growing ranks of healthcare bloggers? What are the pros and cons of blogs for medical professionals? We tackle all of these questions below.

Why Healthcare Providers Blog

Some healthcare providers write blogs to hone their writing skills. Others use their blogs to educate their patients and peers about the latest medical developments. No matter their reasons for starting a blog, many share an urge to display their opinions, triumphs, and trials with others. Following are some of the most important reasons medical professionals write blogs.

To Share Experiences With Others

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 76% of US bloggers write blogs to document and share their experiences with others.² Healthcare providers are no different. Under tremendous pressure to provide their patients with top-notch care while fulfilling numerous other responsibilities, some medical professionals use blogs to cope.

John Crippen, MD, is a general practitioner based in the United Kingdom and one example of a blogger who shares his experiences with readers of his blog, NHS Blog Doctor (<http://nhsblogdoc.blogspot.com>). For example, in August 2006, he devoted part of a blog post to detailing his experience with a patient who had to stop taking oral contraceptives because she suffered from migraines. Dr. Crippen took the time to carefully outline a number of alternative birth control methods with his patient. Although this case may appear mundane, it demonstrates that Dr. Crippen thinks carefully about his patients' needs and works hard to ensure they receive the best care.

To Provide Information

According to Pew, 64% of US bloggers write blogs to share information and skills with other people.² Some medical professionals—especially physicians—blog for

the same reason. One prominent example of an "info blogger" is Kevin Pho, MD, who writes the blog Kevin M.D. (www.kevinmd.com/blog). Each day, Dr. Pho scours the headlines to provide his readers with a sampling of important current healthcare news. His blog has become a must-read and a forum for inspired debate on healthcare-related issues.

For example, shortly after Anna Pou, MD, was arrested for allegedly murdering patients under her care during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Dr. Pho posted a brief item about her on his blog. His post generated extensive and sometimes heated commentary from dozens of bloggers and readers, including members of Dr. Pou's family and physicians she trained.⁴

To Improve Treatment Practices

Some healthcare providers start blogs to improve treatment practices. One prominent "treatment blog" is Clinical

FAST FACTS ABOUT BLOGS

A blog is a website on which items are posted on a regular basis and displayed in reverse chronological order.

It is estimated that 12 million people in the United States write blogs. The total global population of bloggers is unknown.*

Roughly 120,000 Americans blog about health topics.*

Nearly 40% of American adults read blogs.*

* Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project

Cases and Images (<http://clinicalcases.blogspot.com>), founded by Ves Dimov, MD. The blog features medical commentary and clinical cases in a number of therapeutic categories, including neuroscience, infectious disease, and cardiology. Physicians from a number of institutions, including Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Clinic, contribute to the blog.

To Market Themselves

Some medical professionals use blogs to market themselves. For example, doctors at a New Jersey-based urology practice, Urology Associates, developed the Robotic Surgery Blog (www.njurology.com/RoboticSurgeryBlog) to market their services and the da Vinci surgical system. This robotic technology allows surgeons to extend the benefits of minimally invasive surgery to a broader array of patients.

To Share Their Opinions

Another key reason healthcare providers start blogs is to share their opinions on medical care, health policy, and other subjects. One popular blogger who is unafraid to share his thoughts on a range of topics is "Aidan Charles, MD," an anonymous blogger who writes The Examining Room

of Dr. Charles (<http://scienceblogs.com/drcharles>). In one post, Dr. Charles related his feelings about medical lawsuits, saying that "our lawsuit culture is disgusting...because anyone who stands up to do anything of consequence in our society is at risk of being sued for it."⁵

The Benefits and Drawbacks of Blogs for Healthcare Providers

Blogs have many benefits and potential pitfalls. Some practitioners have turned blogging into a lucrative career. However, others have suffered personally and professionally because of material they have published on their blogs. For healthcare providers, the risks and rewards of blogs are even greater. Following is an overview of some of the most important benefits and drawbacks.

Benefit: *Blogs can lead to improved patient recruitment and relations.*

Some healthcare providers have reported that blogs have helped to improve communication with their patients. For example, Dr. Pho has observed that: "Some of my patients are aware of [my blog], and we discuss it during patient visits. Some patients have even found me via the blog and switched to me as their primary care

physician. There seems to be a demand for physicians who understand the Internet's role in patient health information today."

Drawback: *Self-censorship is often necessary.*

Healthcare providers are under ethical and legal obligations to protect the identity of their patients and provide accurate medical information. This means that medical professional bloggers must take pains to ensure that patient confidentiality is preserved and blog content is accurate. These restrictions lead many healthcare bloggers to practice self-censorship, a necessary but sometimes frustrating, requirement.

Benefit: *Blogs can increase a healthcare provider's visibility.*

Blogging has significantly improved the visibility of a number of healthcare providers. Bloggers like the previously mentioned Drs. Charles, Crippen, and Smith have been profiled in a number of publications and have large readerships. These popular bloggers have helped to shape conversation about healthcare issues around the world.

Drawback: *Blogging is not widely accepted by the medical profession.*

Despite its many benefits and growing popularity, healthcare blogging is not yet widely accepted by the medical profession. Because of this, some bloggers' employers have asked them to shut down their blogs.⁶ There is also the danger that medical professionals seeking tenure in academic institutions may be penalized for blogging because their peers do not view it as a valuable activity.

Benefit: *Blogs can enhance connections with colleagues.*

Blogs afford healthcare providers the opportunity to connect with bloggers around the world. One popular online gathering place is Grand Rounds (<http://blogborygmi.blogspot.com/2004/09/grand-rounds-archive-upcoming-schedule.html>), a weekly compendium of superior medical-related posts founded by New York

How To Start A Blog

Decide whether you want to use a free blogging resource or set up a customized blog.

There are numerous free blogging services on the Internet. Some of the most popular include:

- Blogger (www.blogger.com)
- Myspace (www.myspace.com)
- Word Press (www.wordpress.com)

If you decide to develop a customized blog for your website, speak with your Web designer about how to do so. If you work for an academic institution or healthcare organization, think about launching an employer-supported blog.

Blog in the "dark" before going live. Some bloggers blog in the "dark," or privately before announcing their blog to the world or posting publicly. Doing this can help you get into the blogging groove, acclimate yourself to your blogging software, and learn the conventions of the healthcare blogosphere.

Develop a blogging support network. When you start blogging publicly, tell your friends, family, and coworkers that you are writing a blog. Ask them to visit your blog and leave comments. Having a support network during the early days of your blog will motivate you to continue posting while you gradually build an audience.

City-based physician Nicholas Genes, MD. A number of bloggers have credited Grand Rounds for helping them develop closer ties with others in the global healthcare blogging community.

Drawback: *Blog posts remain on the Internet forever*

A major strength of blogging may also be its greatest weakness. Bloggers have the ability to quickly develop and post material for the global online community. In addition, search engines constantly scour the Web, creating permanent records of blog posts, websites, and other online content.

However, healthcare providers should consider the potential impact of material they develop before posting it to their blogs. Publicizing an ill-advised rant about a colleague, political issue, or other topic could potentially harm a blogger years after he or she has forgotten the post. Once published, it is nearly impossible to recant a blog entry. This is why a significant percentage of healthcare providers blog anonymously to protect their friends, families, and careers.

Five Questions You Should Answer Before Starting a Blog

If you are thinking about joining your fellow medical professionals in the blogosphere, congratulations. Blogging can be a rewarding and educational activity. However, it also requires a great deal of commitment. Answering the following questions will help you determine why you want to blog and if you have the perseverance to maintain a blog over the long haul.

Question 1: Do you have time to blog?

Bloggers report that they devote an average of one to two hours per day toward maintaining their blogs. This includes time spent developing posts and commenting on other blogs. Before starting a blog, decide whether you can blog and fulfill your personal and professional responsibilities.

Question 2: What do you want to accomplish with your blog?

Are you doing it to help you keep up with the medical literature, hone your writing skills, or share your experiences? Focusing on accomplishing one or two goals will help you blog more efficiently and build a devoted readership faster.

Question 3: How will you react if it takes you a long time to build an audience?

It can take months to build a significant audience for a blog. Blogging on a regular basis (at least weekly) and commenting on other blogs will help you develop an audience. However, to attract a significant readership, you have to blog over a significant period of time.

Question 4: How will you deal with negative commentary?

Not everyone who reads your blog will agree with you. Some will provide constructive criticism and others may engage in personal attacks. Develop a thick skin, and be prepared to handle negative commentary.

Question 5: What will you do if you lose the motivation to blog?

Even the most successful bloggers can tire of blogging. Be prepared for ebbs and flows in your enthusiasm for the hobby. To avoid burnout follow this advice:

- Do not feel pressured to post on your blog everyday.
- Take breaks from your blog. This will help you develop new ideas for posts and experience life away from the computer.
- If you feel that you are losing all motivation to blog, do not be afraid to quit. After an extended break, you may decide to come back to the blogosphere ready to contribute fresh commentary.

Blogs are helping to change how healthcare providers communicate with their peers, patients, and others. Being knowledgeable about the benefits, drawbacks, and impact of blogs can help you successfully navigate this evolving online community. *mdmg*

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NOTES

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