

Ask someone over 50 whether they use Facebook and chances are they'll say, "what book?". Ask someone under 30 and they'll say, "What, do you mean you don't have Facebook?"

For the generation that has grown up with the internet, Facebook, and other social media sites are as normal—and necessary—a means of communicating as the telephone is for their parents.

But in hospitals and medical practice where that internet generation are now the residents and registrars, nurses and technicians, use of Facebook has led to some embarrassing incidents and breaches of confidentiality, so much so that it has been banned in some hospitals overseas.

A US study published in September last year found that 60% of medical schools had problems with students posting what was considered "unprofessional content" online.<sup>1</sup>

In Britain, it was not just unprofessional content but unprofessional behaviour that led to the suspension of staff and the banning of Facebook from some hospitals. In October 2008, Northampton General Hospital banned staff from using Facebook and other social networking websites after one of their nurses posted one picture of herself at work, topless, and another (clothed this time) with an identifiable patient in the background.

A year later, accident and emergency staff playing the 'lying down game'—where you are photographed lying prone, arms by your side, in unusual places—posted photos of themselves lying down on ward floors, gurneys, even the air ambulance helipad on Facebook. They may have gained a lot of 'lying down game' points, but they lost any brownie points they may have had with their employers, who were not amused. All were suspended.

Sometimes it works the other way too. Patients may access doctors' Facebook sites and use these to strike up an inappropriate relationship. Emma Cuzner, a Medical Defence Union (MDU) medico-legal advisor, described a case where a patient used Facebook to stalk the female general practitioner who treated him for whiplash. The patient used the doctor's Facebook site to find out what her favourite flowers were then left these and a note thanking her with her receptionist and waited for her in the car park. When she went to her car he intercepted her and asked her to have a drink with him. Even though she said no, he kept trying to contact her via her Facebook site. She contacted the MDU and was told to have no contact with the patient and to tighten the security settings on her Facebook site and limit the information she put on it.

Here in Hong Kong we seem to have had fewer



problems with social networking sites as yet. A quick survey of our HKMJ 'brains trust'—the Editorial Board—found the generational divide exists here too, with a number of us admitting to little or no experience of Facebook or other social networking sites.

Those with some experience point out that it has a very healthy side, providing both an outlet and social cohesion for people whose work schedules and pressures may be very alienating and isolating. The biggest concern is the effect on the doctor-patient relationship and the risk that confidentiality may be breached.

Perhaps the final word should be left to two local commentators on either side of the generational divide. First, a senior surgeon: "My understanding is that sometimes surgeons may mention in Facebook tough cases they have done, and even nasty relatives that they encountered. Although no names of the patients were disclosed on Facebook, it would not be difficult for 'insiders' (eg a nurse working in the same hospital) to track which particular patient the surgeon was mentioning. Doctor-doctor relationships may also be affected if negative remarks are made about the department or team or individual senior surgeons on Facebook."

And lastly a member of the Internet generation, a junior surgeon who said: "It is not surprising that many surgeons express their feelings through Facebook. Since the release of Facebook, people have stopped using ICQ, MSN but (choose) rather this public platform. The advantage is more people can get to know your daily life. It is easier to get friends to know what's been happening lately, especially among us working as busy bees everyday. However, as many people can access Facebook, problems arise. Though we are doctors, we are all just ordinary human beings."

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#### Reference

1. Chretien KC, Greysen SR, Chretien JP, Kind T. Online posting of unprofessional content by medical students. *JAMA* 2009;302:1309-15.