

COMMENTARIES

Medfluencing: A New Role for Physicians in the Age of TikTok

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Medfluencing: A New Role for Physicians in the Age of TikTok

TikTok took the world by storm at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and is now one of the largest social media apps, with more than 2 billion mobile downloads.¹ The app tailors a feed of videos to users' preferences based on engagements and interactions that fit each user's interests. Content generated by TikTok's artificial intelligence has been noted to be eerily specific, targeting viewers to niche interests, such as knitting, gardening, and even witchcraft. TikTok has helped launch businesses and create viral trends, in which users around the world participate. The app is also responsible for putting forward a new set of social media stars with large platforms and followings. The impact of this app has been astronomical as it weaved itself into the fabric of our society.

Many medical professionals found their niche on TikTok in a subcommunity appropriately named "MedTok." Several content creators took on the role of "medfluencer" and began creating relatable and informative content pertaining to various aspects of health care. Popular topics include admissions to medical and other health professional schools, misconceptions regarding medical work-life balance, public health, and medical comedy. Health professionals and trainees have used the forum to promote a positive outlook on health worker lives, working to humanize the field. The app allows followers and influencers to communicate with each other through engagements and live feeds to create a community where ideas are freely shared.

For content creator Omar Popal, his TikTok account was born out of a combination of pandemic boredom and the desire to document his journey to medical school. He began sharing tips and specifics to his medical school application and has built an audience of 25,800 followers. Now a first-year medical student at California Health Sciences University, he said the main goal of his account is to demystify what it is to be a medical student. He treats the app as a personal outlet, sharing his lifestyle and the balance of being a trainee. He also emphasizes his experience as an ethnically underrepresented individual, an Afghan, in medicine and addresses bias in his videos. Popal has also responded to not only COVID-19 pandemic-related misinformation but has also tried to use his platform to address equity in health care and be an

active advocate for maternal health. He stated that even behind the app, he finds himself wearing his whitecoat and feeling responsible as an advocate and a representative.

TikTok and public health have been intrinsically linked since the start of the pandemic. It was the long hours in quarantine that skyrocketed the app's initial popularity. The app along with other social media platforms were also responsible for most of the misinformation regarding the pandemic. Medical professionals and trainees using the app have felt a general responsibility to dispel misinformation as experts. Kunal Sood, MD, a pain management specialist-turned-medfluencer agrees with this sentiment. Dr Sood, who is at National Pain and Spine Centers in Germantown, Maryland, appreciates that he can use his platform of 1.2 million followers to reach the general public and spread accurate medical information. To this end, he has created a COVID-specific playlist where he reinforces evidence-based facts and links research articles to better inform his followers, something he considers his duty as a physician. Still, Dr Sood noted that TikTok is an app based in entertainment, and he frequently caters to this with comedy and lifestyle content. Dr Sood regularly interacts with his followers, giving basic health information using TikTok's many video and audio trends. He enjoys being a relatable physician and considers it important in dismantling the views the general public might have about doctors and clinical providers. His efforts are aimed to make health care less paternalistic and more collaborative.

Sam Sadler, a Harvard third-year medical student, appreciates the same relatability in her medical and her online persona. She downloaded TikTok to create comedy content that caters to the site's short-form video format. Her content, targeted to a platform of 71 000 followers, encompasses everything from fashion to dating to the daily life of a medical student. Like many creators, her niche is constantly evolving but she too has a theme of advocacy and health care responsibility. Sadler's platform particularly advocates for those with chronic health problems. She has used her platform to spread awareness for IgG deficiency, which she has. She has documented her journey, discussing her diagnosis, treatments, and difficulties with access to health care. Sadler values authenticity and it's clear that her account shows the multidimensional identity of a health care professional. She has communicated with several other influencers in the medical field to help direct her account. Sadler noted that as a future health care professional, her account has a responsibility to the general public beyond mere entertainment, the extent of which she has yet to explore and understand.

A common theme among these medical influencers has been their access to large followings due to the viral nature of TikTok. They began creating content and amassed a following before they could decide exactly where their content was heading. For many creators, their use of the platform started as a chance

to express their lifestyles and interests, creating everyday content. As their platforms evolved and the algorithm placed them into categories, they felt it hard to ignore the medical responsibilities they held.

TikTok helps to humanize and bridge people in medicine, breaking barriers and opening conversations between patients and health care providers. Because they are looked to as experts, medfluencers have an important role on online forums. This new generation of creators and physicians understands that relatability and collaboration are crucial to open and comfortable conversation with patients. Providers are faced with a unique responsibility to participate in conversations that they are pulled into through social media. They have the potential to serve as advocates and experts to whom other users can look for guidance and reassurance. Health care professionals share this responsibility to make sure that information they are interacting with is valid and accurate. They must find the balance of their daily lives as members of the public while they continue to carry their metaphorical white coats with them. Doctors and trainees on social media cannot look at misinformation and not work to dispel it. It is refreshing to see that creators are working to democratize medicine in this manner, addressing bias on a large scale, and promoting health access by allowing themselves to be transparent to the public.

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