Using social networks to help patients self-care

Social media may create opportunities for people with long-term conditions to manage their own care but health professionals must be aware of those opportunities.

5 key points
1. Social media provide opportunities for some patients to forge supportive relationships with their peers.
2. Health professionals need a range of skills to work with patients in the digital environment.
3. Health professionals must respect the existence of remote peer relationships among people with long-term conditions.
4. Some patients may benefit from appropriate signposting to social networks.
5. More evidence is needed on the value of networks for patients.

In this article...
- Why self-management is important for people with long-term conditions
- The role of networks and peer support in the management of diabetes and other LTCs
- Why health professionals must engage with social networks

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The need to support people with long-term conditions (LTCs) such as diabetes is a significant challenge to the NHS. Rising incidence coupled with the cost of care means we need to find new ways to enable patients to self-manage their conditions. The aim is to empower them to become “expert patients”, who are able to take more responsibility for themselves in order to reduce costs and increase their independence (Greenhalgh, 2009).

Self-management and peer support
There is evidence that improving people’s ability to self-care improves outcomes and quality of life. What is less clear is how this can be achieved (Health Foundation, 2011).

Self-management is crucial in complex LTCs such as diabetes. Although they have periodic contact with health professionals, patients need to master a range of skills and make lifestyle changes to manage their condition independently (Diabetes UK, 2009). For example some must follow strict dietary rules while others must manage complex data and equipment such as insulin pumps. These patients need ongoing support to maintain their skills and sustain the necessary lifestyle changes (Funnell, 2010).

Peer support is one of a range of activities defined as self-management. Dennis (2003) defined it as “support from a person who has experiential knowledge of a specific behaviour or stressor and similar characteristics as the target population”. She also noted that there is a difference between support from lay individuals, who may or may not be “peers”, and peers who are trained to provide more expert support. This provides a continuum between untrained lay helpers through to highly trained paraprofessionals.

Social networking sites give patients the chance to share and discover information.