

Communicating With Your Doctor On Facebook May Be The Future Of Healthcare



We communicate with our friends, our families and our coworkers via email and Facebook, and apparently, most Americans also wish that they could keep in touch with their health care providers this way.

A national survey of 2,252 pharmacy customers conducted by Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health highlights the gap between what patients want from their health care providers in terms of communication and engagement, and what they're actually getting.

"This study tells us that for most patients, healthcare isn't quite ready for the future," Joy Lee, a post-doctoral fellow at the university, told The Huffington Post.

In fact, there's something of a patient engagement paradox in healthcare, Lee said.

"On the one hand, doctors, policymakers, and researchers often talk about the need to engage patients," she explained. On the other hand, many patients are already engaged -- in Facebook and other online communities. Yet instead of embracing this connection, medicine is preoccupied with confidentiality and drawing professional boundaries.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents -- who were generally educated, healthy and regular users of Facebook -- said that they were very interested in using Facebook and email to communicate with their physicians and to manage their health. More than half of respondents also said that they wanted to use their physicians' websites to access health information.

More than a third said that they already communicated with their doctors via email, and 18 percent said they connected with their doctors on Facebook, a surprising finding considering that many health care providers have rules barring this mode of interaction with patients due to privacy concerns and [ethical guidelines](#) for physicians.

Young adults -- as well as caregivers, patients with chronic conditions, and regular Facebook users -- were more likely to communicate with their doctors via email and Facebook.

Lee emphasized that of course, it's critical to safeguard patient information. But "Health care organizations need to figure out how to take advantage of resources like Facebook," she added.

They're already on the way. As [part of the growing telehealth movement](#), many doctors and health care organizations have electronic systems that patients can use for things like messaging, accessing test results and personal information, and health tracking.

"Many patients are interested in [these services] but few are actually using them -- possibly because patients don't know they're available," Lee said. "Doctors and health care organizations should take steps to publicize and educate patients of these opportunities. Either way, it starts with a conversation between patients and doctors on how they prefer to communicate online."

The study was [published this month in the Journal of General Internal Medicine](#).