



University of Missouri

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## Examining hospitals' social media savvy

### Health care plugs in to social media

Story by Tara Ballenger

New technologies, including electronic medical records, digital X-rays and telehealth services, are revolutionizing the medical industry.

But Facebook?

An undergraduate research team is exploring how Missouri hospitals are using the popular social media website to create an online community of patients.

“Facebook offers a window into the patient experience,” says Ricky Leung, an assistant professor in the medical school’s health management and informatics department.

Leung worked with health management and informatics Assistant Professor Kalyan Pasupathy and sociology Assistant Professor Amit Prasad to lead the interdisciplinary team, which included undergraduates from majors as diverse as English, psychology and biological engineering.

They began by recording how many “friends” had joined each hospital’s Facebook page.



Next, students looked at the frequency and content of the hospitals' posts. "That was the most difficult part — we look at the entire history of posts, so there were hundreds in all," says Lauren Stoner, a junior biological sciences student from Columbia, Ill.

Stoner was surprised at the popularity of the Facebook pages — especially at hospitals that specialized in delivering babies. "People love to post pictures of their newborns," and friends and relatives respond by posting their well wishes, she says.

Another unexpected finding was the content of hospitals' posts, Stoner says. Although Facebook can be a way to inundate audiences with advertising, most posts either informed readers or sparked discussion about general health topics and medical procedures.

Patients were more inclined to "like" and comment on those posts than on ones meant to build the hospital's reputation or announce new equipment and procedures, Leung says.

Facebook's role in helping businesses reach their customers will continue to expand, Leung says, but health care providers face unique challenges.

Most hospitals are nonprofit, so they use information not only to increase profits, but also to provide service by understanding what patients value in medical care, he says.

For Stoner, who plans to go to medical school, the project offers a glimpse into the changing landscape of medicine and business. "It's good to know what's out there and how patients are communicating," she says.

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