

Medical Student Blogging Report

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Medical Student Blogging

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Medical Student Blogging

Introduction:

A blog, short for weblog, is a website that is updated frequently and displays entries in reverse-chronological order. Blogs are often started by individuals and used as public diaries of sorts. They may also include spaces for comments by other users. In this way, they can be used for discussion and debate on a variety of topics.

Recent events involving UVA students have made the administration aware that medical students are blogging. This brings up a unique set of issues and potential problems, which will be discussed below. It is also important to consider the potential value of medical student blogging. In the following discussion, we will explore the risks and benefits of medical student blogs, and present suggestions for encouraging valuable and ethical student blogs. One such suggestion, a blog sponsored by UVA School of Medicine, will be discussed in detail.

Potential Benefits:

The medical student blogger, other medical students, and the general public all have the potential to benefit from a medical student blog. On a personal level, the student blogger could use the blog as a forum to organize and document their thoughts about medical school. In order to prevent burnout and to deal with the emotionally charged issues that often arise in medicine, it is important for students and physicians to express these thoughts in some manner. Also, a blog could serve the purpose of encouraging a student to critically evaluate their experiences in medical school. Taking the time to think and write can lead to a more thorough understanding of the medical and social issues a student faces on a daily basis.

A medical student blog could also benefit other medical students. Reading another student's blog might expose a student to ideas and experiences that they would have otherwise been unaware of. There are currently blogs being written by students from all over the world. Reading a student's blog from another school or even another country provides a way for UVA students to expand their understanding of diversity. Secondly, parts of medical school can be emotionally and physically draining, and it could be helpful for students to know that their peers are having similar difficulties. In particular, it could be very encouraging to read an older student's blog who has already made it through some of these tough times. Thirdly, student blogs may include specific advice that could help other students. Existing medical student blogs already give advice on the decision to apply to medical school, the admissions process, preparation for the USMLE, how to succeed on clerkships, and the residency application and match process. This advice written by UVA students, specifically for UVA students, would be even more valuable.

The general public could gain a valuable insight into the education of medical students as well. With all of the myths surrounding medicine and medical education on television, a medical student blog is an excellent opportunity to explain the truth to the public.

Finally, there are added benefits to having a blog sponsored by UVA School of Medicine. This is not a unique idea; several such programs already exist. For example, the University of Michigan School of Medicine started their "Dose of Reality" blog in 2006. Two students from each medical school class were selected to blog about their experiences on a University sponsored website. A similar program exists at Stanford University. Their website explains the mission of the program: "The SoM Blogs Project aims to provide transparency into the far-ranging activities taking place at the School of Medicine by equipping faculty, students and staff

with personal blogs.” In addition to the benefits to medical students discussed above, a school sponsored blog is an excellent publicity tool. A well-organized, aesthetically pleasing website is an important asset to any medical school. Such a website, and the contents of the blogs on it, could attract students to apply to and choose to attend UVA School of Medicine. In fact, other schools at UVA have already adopted this idea. The UVA Office of Undergraduate Admissions lists links to blogs about student life, transfer students, admissions questions, and financial aid. On a part of Darden’s official website, the school lists several current students’ blogs. For web addresses of all mentioned blogs, see Appendix A.

Risks and Concerns:

As discussed earlier, recent events involving UVA students have made the administration aware that medical students are blogging. We propose that instituting guidelines for medical student bloggers and creating a school-sponsored website will alleviate some of the concerns as well as define a potential recourse if and when the guidelines are violated. It is the purpose of this section to discuss both potential concerns and possible safeguards addressing those concerns. While this list is not exhaustive, we find it useful to define the concerns as they relate to the profession of medicine as a whole, the University of Virginia School of Medicine as an institution, its medical students, and lastly, but importantly, our patients.

Professional Concerns

The first concerns relate broadly to the profession of medicine as a whole and the general process of medical education. If anyone involved in patient care (attendings, fellows, residents, medical students, nurses, staff, etc.) presents themselves in an unprofessional manner on a blog, they not only engender mistrust of that individual themselves but of the medical profession as a whole. UVA SoM has already implemented a system to safeguard against this behavior while in the hospital through its NetLearning Professionalism module. We recommend extending this emphasis on professionalism through guidelines for medical student blogging as discussed below in the implementation section. Other concerns regard the praxis of medical education.

In the not so distant past, medical students were afforded an autonomy that oftentimes superseded their skill level. We currently strive for transparency and want patients to understand the hierarchy of care but appreciate that the perception of a medical students’ role may be affected by this abused history. If a medical student takes to a public forum such as a blog using specialized language commonplace amongst colleagues it may be misconstrued by patients. This could erroneously reinforce doubts about our commitment to patient-centered care and endanger the most integral part of our medical education. In order to shield against this, we will emphasize in the blogging guidelines that the blog be written cognizant of how it may be interpreted by persons outside the field of medicine.

Institutional Concerns

As outlined in the University of Virginia’s student rights and responsibilities¹, the University strives to create an atmosphere “in which the ideals of freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of the individual are sustained.” The medical school greatly values and honors these freedoms. Acting within these freedoms, medical school

¹ Student Rights and Responsibilities, University of Virginia,
<http://www.virginia.edu/vpsa/rights.html>

students thus have the right to post information and opinions which defame the hospital and university institutions both accurately and/or inaccurately. This is not preventable. We hope that through the guidelines outlined below- specifically regarding reliability of information or presenting information which is libelous, defamatory, knowingly false or misrepresents another [institution]- this will be alleviated.

Creating a school sponsored blog is also a potential safeguard. As discussed in the section on implementation, students interested in becoming bloggers would apply to participate. The group of students would possibly self-select for those interested in maintaining the high standards and reputation of the University. This application process could also be supplemented by an orientation in which both professionalism and the code of blogging are discussed. Despite these initiatives, it is still possible that students will negatively portray the University or Healthsystem. The University of Michigan SoM² sponsored website includes the following statement:

The opinions expressed in any post or comment on this blog web site are those of the **author alone** and do not represent the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan may monitor this blog about the information you'll find or delete inappropriate content. Any information provided in this blog is offered "AS IS" with no warranties, and no rights are conferred to you. You assume all risk for your use."

Limiting the freedoms of speech by the bloggers on the school sponsored site could compromise the interest and integrity of the blog. It is also undetermined if the blog would serve as a school newspaper and thus enjoy the same freedoms of press without censorship by the school. It is important that these claims be investigated before launching the blogging project. If the blog were likened to a school newspaper, an editor position may be necessary.

Another institutional concern regards the comments posted by readers. Readers may post comments that realize any or all of the concerns listed in these categories. The author of the blog is considered to "own" these comments. Because comments are generally posted in real-time, a blogger may not have the opportunity to read them before being viewed by the general public. One of the goals of the school-sponsored blog is to create a dialogue between the medical student and his/her reader, but in order to maintain a constructive dialogue we recommend that comments only be posted after first being screened by the blogger.

Medical Student Concerns

Internet social networks such as Facebook and MySpace are increasingly popular. It is apparent that many admissions committees and future/current employers currently search these networks. If disagreeable information is posted in blogs, like photos and comments uploaded to these sites, it may inadvertently hinder possible job or further schooling opportunities. A more advertent medical student concern is that he/she may cast aspersions on his/her classmates. The law regarding whether this is considered to be

² University of Michigan's "Dose of Reality" <http://www2.med.umich.edu/medschool/reality/>

on-campus conduct and therefore subject to University codes of conduct is evolving³. This concern aligns with the first risk noted under professional concerns at large and the same “safety” measures need to be in place to ensure the standards of the medical community are upheld. We also recommend that blogs not be anonymous. Anonymity may allow more honest speech; however, anonymity rarely exists on the internet even with an “unidentified” screen name. Knowing that information posted will be associated with the persons name and will therefore be viewable by future employers, will reduce base commentary.

Patient Concerns

Lastly, one of the major risks of medical blogging in general is that patient confidentiality may be compromised. Medical students must always uphold the confidentiality standards set by HIPAA and the institution. If confidentiality is breeched, there are definable penalties set forth by the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office for Civil Rights. However, another great concern is that the inviolable patient-caregiver role may be compromised. Even if identifiers are removed from patient scenarios, meeting confidentiality standards, a patient may recognize their own story and feel exploited or emotionally violated. The tone of these guidelines emphasizes that we strive to honor the patient-caregiver relationship as it extends beyond the hospital room or office walls. We recommend below that consent be given by the patient if he or she will be including in a blog. We believe that involving patients in this creative blogging process will strengthen the healthcare alliance and initiate dialogue not only within the medical community but among the patients whom we serve.

Suggestions for implementation:

In order to implement a UVA medical student blog, first the university would need to adopt a code of ethics for students to follow while blogging. A general blogger’s code of ethics, developed by a seasoned blogger (Appendix A) and adopted by many other bloggers, offers the following suggestions for safe blogging.

1. “Take responsibility not just for your own words, but for the comments you allow on your blog.”
 - a. He defines this further by quoting a statement from The BlogHer Community Guidelines. “We embrace your diversity of opinions and values... but we insist that your content may not include anything unacceptable. We define unacceptable content as anything included or linked that is:
 - i. Being used to abuse, harass, stalk or threaten a person or persons
 - ii. Libelous, defamatory, knowingly false or misrepresents another person
 - iii. Infringes upon any copyright, trademark, trade secret or patent of any third party. (If you quote or excerpt someone's content, it is your responsibility to provide proper attribution to the original author. For a clear definition of proper attribution and fair use, please see The Electronic Frontier Foundation's Legal Guide for Bloggers)

³ Beckstrom, Darryn, “Who’s looking at your Facebook profile? The use of Student Conduct Codes to censor college students’ online speech” *Willamette Law Review*, 45 Willamette L. Rev. 261

- iv. Violates any obligation of confidentiality
 - v. Violates the privacy, publicity, moral or any other right of any third party
 - vi. Contains editorial content that has been commissioned and paid for by a third party, (either cash or goods in barter), and/or contains paid advertising links and/or SPAM...”
2. “Label your tolerance level for abusive comments.”
 3. “Consider eliminating anonymous comments.”
 4. “Ignore the trolls.
 - a. Obviously, it's hard to miss nasty comments that are sent to you directly in email, and you can't police your own blog without reading the comments, but you can, for instance, ban the IP address of someone who violates your guidelines. And you can let people know that their comments are inappropriate without shaming them publicly.”
 5. “Take the conversation offline, and talk directly, or find an intermediary who can do so.”
 6. “If you know someone who is behaving badly, tell them [sic] so.”
 7. “Don't say anything online that you wouldn't say in person.”

These guidelines offer helpful advice for bloggers in general, but more specific guidelines are needed when dealing with blogs that relate to healthcare and are represented by the university.

For example, The Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics (Appendix A) includes the following guidelines, which would serve as a good set of rules to govern a medical student blog.

1. “Clear representation of perspective - readers must understand the training and overall perspective of the author of a blog. Certainly bloggers can have opinions on subjects outside of their training, and these opinions may be true, but readers must have a place to look on a blog to get an idea of where this author is coming from. This also encompasses the idea of the distinction between advertisement and content. This does not preclude anonymous blogging, but it asks that even anonymous bloggers share the professional perspective from which they are blogging.
2. Confidentiality - Bloggers must respect the nature of the relationship between patient and medical professionals and the clear need for confidentiality. All discussions of patients must be done in a way in which patients’ identity cannot be inferred. A patient’s name can only be revealed in a way that is in keeping with the laws that govern that practice (HIPPA, Informed Consent).
3. Commercial Disclosure - the presence or absence of commercial ties of the author must be made clear for the readers. If the author is using their blog to pitch a product, it must be clear that they are doing that. Any ties to device manufacturer and/or pharmaceutical company ties must be clearly stated.
4. Reliability of Information - citing sources when appropriate and changing inaccuracies when they are pointed out
5. Courtesy - Bloggers should not engage in personal attacks, nor should they allow their commenters to do so. Debate and discussion of ideas is one of the major purposes of blogging. While the ideas people hold should be criticized and even confronted, the overall purpose is a discussion of ideas, not those who hold ideas.”

In addition to following a general healthcare code of ethics, medical students’ blogs should

adhere to the UVA Health System Compliance Code of Conduct. A copy of this code in entirety can be found in appendix B. The important points that can be generalized to medical student blogging include: obeying the law, observing antitrust laws, obeying laws relating to government and donor contacts, avoiding conflicts of interest, neither giving nor receiving any illegal gifts, favors, or kickbacks, promoting a positive work environment, and most importantly, maintaining confidentiality of sensitive patient information and employee and student personnel records.

Combing these codes of conduct and ethics creates a specific set of guidelines for medical student bloggers, which should protect the reputation of the university, of the individual student, and of patients. In addition, the blog could be monitored for inappropriate content both by fellow UVA medical student bloggers and by the university, with appropriate action taken for those bloggers who do not follow the code of conduct.

Our vision for the UVA medical student blog begins with support from the university and space on the UVA SOM website with access for students, faculty, applicants, friends, patients, parents, and any other interested parties. Students interested in becoming bloggers would go through an application process to gauge their understanding of the code of conduct and ethics and their commitment to the project. At least one student and hopefully more would represent each class and blog on their medical school experiences. Depending on the students' schedules, blogs could be posted weekly, biweekly, or monthly with students taking turns on blogging when more than one student from each class is participating. For the first year students, topics might include, adjusting to medical school, feelings about anatomy lab, the first patient encounter in POM, balancing schoolwork and life activities, summer plans, etc. Second year students' topics could include frustrations over studying, preparation for boards, study tips, and advice for the first year students. Third year students would most likely focus on clerkships and their first experiences on the wards. These blogs in particular would be a fantastic resource for rising third year students and could act as a "survival guide" for students beginning clerkships. Topics for fourth year would include choosing a specialty, organizing the elective schedule, residency applications and interviews, and of course, match day.

In addition to the blogs, writers can be contacted with questions from their readers and either answer them individually, or if he/she feels the question is appropriate and useful for the entire audience, answer the question in a blog format. This would encourage dialogue among the bloggers and readers, and hopefully tailor the topics to items the readers want to see.

Also, student bloggers could invite guests to blog if they have an interesting experience they would like to share, such as away electives, international experiences, community service, or a great anatomy lab story.

In order to create dialogue with other medical schools, the website could provide links to other schools with student blogs, such as the University of Michigan and Stanford University. UVA students can compare their experiences with students from other universities and possibly establish contacts with some of their future colleagues. In addition, UVA bloggers could choose an outside "Blog of the Week" which could be from an international medical school, or other medical blog site.

Lastly, for those students wishing to blog about a unique patient experience, informed consent and confidentiality are of utmost importance. We would encourage dialogue between the student and patient to ask permission to share the patient's story (with any identifiers removed) on the blog, and invite the patient to read and even comment on the blog. We feel that this dialogue would be beneficial to the student-patient relationship while ensuring consent and confidentiality.

Appendix A –

Medical School Sponsored Blogs

University of Michigan’s “Dose of Reality”

<http://www2.med.umich.edu/medschool/reality/>

Stanford University’s SoM Blogs Project

<http://med.stanford.edu/blogs/>

Existing UVA Blogs

Darden School of Business

<http://www.darden.virginia.edu/html/DardenBlogger.aspx?styleid=4>

Undergraduate Student Blogs

<http://uvalife.blogspot.com/>

<http://uvatoday.org/blog/>

Undergraduate Admissions

<http://uvaapplication.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.uvatransferadmission.blogspot.com/>

Undergraduate Financial Aid

<http://accessuva.blogspot.com/>

Codes of Ethics

Bloggers’ Code of Ethics

<http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2007/04/draft-bloggers-1.html>

Healthcare Bloggers’ Code of Ethics

<http://medbloggercode.com/>