

Twitter: information in a nutshell

Twitter is a lot more than a collection of self-conscious celebrity soundbites. It can be useful to busy GPs and is mercifully concise, as Harry Brown explains.



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The communications revolution has really gathered pace in recent years, greatly assisted by

mobile phone and internet technologies, and one of the buzz phrases of recent times is “social media”. For a detailed definition check out another wonder of the modern Internet era – Wikipedia: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

Mention social media and most people think automatically of Facebook and Twitter, although there is much more to social media other than these two outlets. To devote a whole article to Twitter may come as a surprise, as it may not seem very relevant to a primary care workforce, but it can in fact be a very useful tool for busy healthcare professionals.

What is Twitter?

Twitter was founded as recently as 2006 and has a fascinating history, which is well covered by (yes, you have guessed it) Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>.

A lot of people have a vague idea of what Twitter is about and think of it as a stream of quotes from celebrities. Sure, it has that element, but Twitter is a massive online community covering a colossal range of interests. If you are new to it or don't know much about it, it's easy to be put off by the vocabulary and culture, but in essence it's very user friendly. If you are stuck, Twitter has produced a helpful glossary at <https://support.twitter.com/articles/166337-the-twitter-glossary>.

The concept of Twitter is very simple; once you create an account (it's free) at <https://twitter.com> you generate a username and password and off you go. Effectively you have a created a wall which is your own personal space (though don't assume it is private – it's not). Initially your wall is blank as you are not known to the Twitter “community”. So it is probably best to start “following”

people or organisations and get the feel of it. Their feeds will populate your wall and it is a simple matter of scrolling down and reading a list of your feeds from the newest to the oldest.

Using Twitter

By following, you make a conscious decision to subscribe to someone's Twitter postings – or “tweets”. Again, this is free and once found is simply a matter of clicking the “follow” button of your target. If you don't like this collection of postings, simply click the “unfollow” button and you won't hear any more from them.

If you are following someone/something, then think of it as a rolling newsfeed – similar to what you might see running along the bottom of a screen in a 24-hour news channel.

A tweet is the main means of communication and crucially is restricted to a maximum of 140 characters. The 140 character limit means that there are no verbose contributions, so it is quick and easy to read (or ignore). It also means that Twitter is ideal to use on a mobile device such as a tablet or a smartphone. Within the 140 character limit, there is room for links to sites outside of Twitter. This is of great interest to healthcare professionals, as these links could be to external journals, textbooks or clinical guidance.

The tweets or feeds have the title of the provider, often with a profile picture (you can, of course, also upload your own profile picture). Everyone also their own identifier or username preceded by @; for example, I am @drharrybrown. The other symbol that can cause confusion is the “hashtag”, or # sign, which comes before a key word or phrase. This allows tweets containing the hashtag preceding the word or phrase to be easily searchable and grouped. For example, if you wanted to search all tweets that mention Apple computers and their products, it is #apple. This discovery tool is contained with other tweets and they can be found by simply clicking on that hashtag phrase.

Finding resources to follow

From the medical perspective there are loads of feeds to follow. You have to begin somewhere, and a good starting point would be the Royal College of General Practitioners (@rcgp), which, like all feeds, can be found simply by using the search facility. Other Twitter accounts useful to GPs (see table below) could include the General Medical Council (@gmcuk) and the British Medical Journal (@bmj_latest). However, you don't have to follow established organisations; you can also follow individuals. For example, I follow Dr Richard Vautrey (@rvautrey), who is the deputy chair of the BMA's GP committee.

SOME USEFUL TWITTER ACCOUNTS

- **@bmj_latest** British Medical Journal
- **@gmcuk** General Medical Council
- **@MHRMedicines** updates from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency
- **@Doctors_net_uk** Online medical community based in the UK
- **@HarvardHealth** Medical information from Harvard Medical School
- **@Gponlinenews** GP news, as well as clinical and educational information

Being a computer based system, Twitter will quickly understand what your interests are and suggest related interests to you. If you want to view these suggestions, you can see them on your home page, click on them and follow them. Alternatively, you can search for something that you are interested in. For example, if you want to check out NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence), just pop NICE into the search box and click your choice.

Once you have your few starter twitter feeds to follow, you can click on the resources you are following, see who they

are following and, in turn, who else is following that chosen resource. This can provide even more twitter feeds to follow.

Getting established

Once you have built a collection of feeds to follow, all you have to do is log into your account via <https://twitter.com/>, type in your details and you can obtain a listing of the latest postings (tweets or feeds) of all the resources that you follow. This is in time order with the most recent first. Simply scroll down the page and check all the postings. Often they will contain a hashtag and/or a link that takes you to an external source.

Using this as a medical resource, you are effectively being presented with a stream of medical feeds customised to your own interests. It does not take long to read through and there will always be one or two items that will catch your attention.

If you find a resource persistently unhelpful or irrelevant then simply 'unfollow' it and it will permanently disappear from your feed. If you think you are following too many feeds simply cull some of them by unfollowing them until your Twitter reading becomes manageable.

Because of the layout of Twitter and the limitation of the contents of a tweet to 140 characters, it is ideal not just for desktop computers but for mobile devices such as tablets and phones. I have the relevant Twitter apps (again free) for my iPhone and iPad and they are easy to use and read.

Similar apps are available for other platforms, such as Android. As we use more mobile devices in our day to day lives, Twitter may become accessed more and more through these devices, without any need to use a desktop computer. Twitter on the move is ideal for spare moments to log on and reading the equivalent of a customised "newspaper". You can also send a direct message to someone on Twitter which is personal between you and them (for more information read <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20169555-send-and-receive-direct-messages>).

A word of warning

If you do publish a tweet remember it is in the public domain and assume anything you post is publically accessible. The General Medical Council has recently published guidance (Doctors' use

of social media, 2013. http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/ethical_guidance/21186.asp), which is essential reading for any doctor using this resource.

All your tweets are picked up by people who are following you, but it's prudent to consider them potentially available to anyone. So be careful that what you say is legal and sensible and also complies with GMC guidance.

There is also a Social Media Highway Code from the RCGP (<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/social-media>), but a lot of official guidance is simple common sense that

applies equally to the real world.

In summary, Twitter can be great fun, educational and, if used properly, a very convenient medical tool to keep you up to date. Once an account is set up, it can take very little time to read through the postings on your twitter account. And remember it's all free!

USEFUL RESOURCE

<http://mashable.com/2012/06/05/twitter-for-beginners/>

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