

Chapter 9

Social Networks as a Tool to Improve the Life Quality of Chronic Patients and Their Relatives

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of society has modified the medical needs of the population from social and economic criteria. Social networks can partially help these new medical demands contributing to improve the life quality of chronic patients and their relatives through the modification of the ways of communication and interaction. In order to analyze the real value of social networks in this chapter the authors study a real case. This analysis allows them to identify the benefits that social networks can provide to chronic patients, as well as the barriers that must be considered to implement them as health service tools.

INTRODUCTION

In most developed countries, life expectancy is growing (United Nations Organization, 2001; Spanish National Statistical Institute, 2010). This phenomenon has an influence on the rising of the

chronic patients, at the level of the total number of chronic patients as well as the ratio of chronic patients over the total number of patients. As a consequence, private and public health services must change their strategies and operations in order to adapt their structures to these new social needs.

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This change in health structures is more a necessity than a possibility because of two main aspects:

1. Considering social criteria (World Health Organization, 2002), the aged people have more risk to surpass the threshold of dependency, which indicates that developed countries will need more chronic cares for their population.
2. Considering economic criteria, health services' demand is inelastic through the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which means that, in a growing economy, for every 100 new dollars earned, 10 are for new health services (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004).

As an answer to this health framework, the advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are generating an important relational change (Castells, 1999) and, through social networks, ICTs have the power to reinvent the way people communicate and interact with each other (De Ugarte, 2009). As a part of ICTs, social networks, or virtual communities, have become one of the most popular Internet services (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalú, 2006). They can be used not only as marketing tools or for personal contacts management, but also to develop relational environments which contribute to improve the life quality of the chronic patients and their relatives through the modification of patients' ways of communication and interaction.

Thus, taking advantage of the new technologies (Souter, 2010), either giving more health services to the chronic patients or improving the communication between different patients, their relatives and their caregivers, can be an important way to improve the life quality of all these people. These new health services that can be given using the social networks should not only reinforce the old health services given by caregivers or rela-

tives, but also should be absolutely new means to increase the total amount of services provided and change the accessibility, equity and the care continuum. This has to be pointed out, because the former literature has not realized that social networks can provide the specific needs of different groups of chronic patients.

In another way, the ICTs and the social networks, as a part of them, can solve part of the economic problems related to the increasing costs of the health services. The potential of social networks to provide online health services has not been developed yet. In contrast, there are other economic sectors that have developed their online services, as the banking sector (Nadal, 2007). This fact gives a wide range to improve the investment on ICTs services in health services.

In order to create successful social networks it is important to know the real needs and limitations of patients, such as a possible loss of privacy, low familiarity with the use of the Internet (II Jornadas de Alfabetización Digital, 2007), dropout rate of social networks (Undernews 2010) or psychological barriers to share information about some kind of illness. We can find some interventions focused exclusively on patients' education, social support, and relationship, medical problems solving or a combination of the above, but we know very little about the impact on behavior, performance, or welfare. This side has to be pointed out, because the implementation of social networks upon health services is not a commonly studied topic.

Considering the above arguments, this chapter's objective is to propose social networks as a tool that can significantly improve the life quality of chronic patients, and it is especially concerned in the analysis of the benefits that social networks can provide to patients, as well as the barriers that must be considered to implement them as health services tools.

For that purpose, on one hand we describe some real cases of patients' associations to understand the benefits of social networks for chronic patients,

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