A stroll through the medical blogosphere

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Abstract

Medical blogs are a very popular way of communicating health-related information. They can be written by medical professionals or laypeople, and topics include diseases, procedures, health policies, and personal topics such as everyday experiences. In this article, we provide examples of medical blogs that illustrate the language used, which can be technical, semi-technical, or informal. Medical blogs need to be accurate and well written because they provide precious information about health-related issues.

Keywords: Medical blogs, Language, Form, Style, Lay audience

If you have a rash or fever, more often than not, you will consult the Internet before you visit your general practitioner. Once you open your browser and start searching for a medical topic, you will be flooded with links to many kinds of websites. Some will take you to online scientific journals, while others will take you to different wikis, question and answer portals (Q&A), or blogs. In this paper, we focus on medical blogs.

'Blog' is blend of the term 'Web log', a specific form of online diary. Blogs serve as platforms for voicing personal or professional views on a certain topic. Topics are listed in chronological order and may have photos and videos as well as hyperlinks to other web pages or blogs. Blogs are easily accessible, and anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can author one. Usually, users can subscribe to a blog, leave comments, and find references to other blogs and relevant pages. This interconnectivity and ability to provide feedback facilitates 'knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate, [and] they often attract a large and dedicated readership'.[1] Usually blogs appear as diaries expressing the author's feelings, opinions, and ideas. Some blogs, however, are educational tools used by students and education professionals, while others aim to serve as a forum for people who share similar opinions or professions.

Medical blogs

Medical blogs do not differ much from other blogs, although they focus, broadly speaking, on health and health-related issues. Their content varies from diseases, medication, health policies, health research, and nutrition to personal experiences.[2] Typically, medical blogs focus on one topic, but it is not uncommon for them to cover two or more.[3] Medical blog authors vary from physicians, nurses, medical students, patients, patients' family members, lawyers to journalists. The content can be considered as either informative or affective; informative content uses medical terminology extensively, while affective content uses an abundance of adjectives.[2] Three groups of bloggers are identified: physicians, patients, and nurses. It has been noticed that physicians tend to focus on illnesses, patients mainly focus on medication, and nurses focus on their everyday life and experiences.[2] Blogs written by physicians can be on a specific illness, procedure, or health policy, or they can deal with their everyday experiences or professional communication. Some bloggers are anonymous or write under pseudonyms, and for those who appear to be more transparent, it is usually impossible to check their credentials and identity with certainty.

This fact and the easy accessibility of blogs lead us to the question of the validity and relevance of the information disseminated on medical blogs. Not all of the authors reference the information on their blogs to a medical journal or traditional medical literature. Blog authors who publish scientific papers or books tend to mirror the conventions of scientific writing.[4] Some blogs (e.g. *Intensive*[5]) have more contributors who range in function from editors and section editors to consultants. These

are often associated with official institutions, so they tend to be more credible.

The personal diary nature of blogs tends to make their writing a stream of consciousness. As Scott Plutchak[6] noticed while experimenting with blog writing, it takes less time to write a blog post than other types of documents; he observed that even with the time spent on revisions, blog writing is far less time-consuming than writing editorials. Writing editorials or scientific papers, in his opinion, is not the mere reporting of one's thoughts and ideas, but an exploration, a finding out of what one thinks about a certain topic. However, one of the advantages of this type of online publishing is the direct dissemination of information, knowledge, opinions, and ideas on a peer-to-peer level; blogs, Twitter, and e-mail discussions are far superior for this kind of exchange than online journals and traditional publishing.[7] A likely reason for this is the informality of blogs, which can also be a disadvantage.

Form and style

Patient-written posts tend to be longer than those of nurses and physicians. Nurses tend to use more adjectives and everyday language. Patients tend to avoid names of their diseases '(e.g. the beast instead of 'migraine') or use only abbreviations (e.g. Type 2 instead of diabetes type 2)'.[2] 'Abbreviations (e.g. CLL for chronic lymphocytic leukemia), enumerations, and citations of conversations as well as common speech, medical terms, and opinion-related words are used frequently in medical blog posts'.[2] The format of medical blogs seems to encourage a more conversational style and can sometimes even lead to online discussion boards. Sentences tend to be syntactically simple and correct. The language and the scope of medical terminology used, however, differ significantly according to the aimed or expected audience. The following randomly selected examples illustrate some of linguistic and content variants of medical blogs.

Example 1

Sinus bradycardia HR ~60 bpm with intermittent sinus arrest / sinus exit block, shown by 2 missing p waves followed by 2 ventricular escape beats at a rate just under 40 bpm.[8]

This particular example is an answer to a question in an educational post where readers (students or younger practitioners of medicine) are supposed to interpret a photo that contains rhythm strips of a fictional case-scenario. The answer is revealed after one click on the question of the post. This example is obviously aimed at professionals, not laypersons. The language is highly technical, abundant in noun phrases and abbreviations. An average person with no medical education would probably have difficulties understanding this.

Example 2

My dear readers, if you even exist anymore :-), I have neglected you. For that I am sorry. My last post was more than a year ago.[…]So, insert drum roll here, here it is! My first video lecture demonstrating how to use ultrasound to gain peripheral venous access. Hope you'll like it, because there are others following soon, and I intend to bore you with them as well;).[9]

This example is of a personal blog written by a doctor. The content is as diverse as the heading of the blog itself says: '*about medicine, science, internet, soap bubbles, design, imaginary friends, books, music for robots, uncreative taglines …*'[9] The language varies from very informal (use of emoticons, and idioms) to more specific or technical. The audience here is not specified, but there is a specific conversational or familiar tone as if talking to friends or peers. The posts vary from medical applications (Apps) to medical emergencies during football matches. The language is informal where possible and reverts to being technical where needed.

Example 3

In theory, all doctors should treat all patients equally. In practice, nice, friendly patients get better, quicker treatment. Queue shock, horror, outrage.[10]

This example is from the *British Medical Journal*[11] which has various direct links that can take you to diverse blogs dealing with myriad of topics. This one comes from a doctor's blog. The main audience is patients as indicated by the title, *Inside secrets to getting the best hospital care.*[10] Thus, the language used is far from technical. It is conversational, yet borderline formal, with frequent informal intrusions (e.g. *rubbish care, stroppy, demanding, impatient arse*[10]). The style of the post is very humorous, one might even say satirical, if, say, the reader is a doctor. If you are a patient, you might find it a bit offensive, yet practical.

Example 4

This year, there has been a major resurgence of measles, a dangerous disease that for decades had been virtually unknown in the United States. And it's become clear that measles has re-emerged as a public health issue in this country because large numbers of individuals remain unvaccinated.[12]

Figure 1:   A well-organized medical blog.

As a part of the blog *Well*[12] of the *The NewYork Times*, this post is written in journalistic/column style. The post itself begins with a more personal touch with the author introducing the story from her private life but then it goes on to be more factual and narrative. The terminology is in the sphere of plain language (*Confronted with a patient suffering from a fever, red eyes, runny nose, cough and blotchy rash, we don't even think of measles[…]*[12]). The language is adapted for the broadest audience possible.

Writing a medical blog

People who decide to write a medical blog should pay attention to the type of information they provide, accessibility and readability of the blog, and the language used.

Since blogs are a personal view on any issue close to authors' heart, they undoubtedly portray their views, opinions and attitudes. Medical blogs, however, usually provide the readers with facts about health-related topics and should, therefore,

be more objective. The credibility of the information is achieved through mentioning the sources either by referencing them or by inserting a hyperlink to a research/article. Another way to achieve credibility is for the authors to clearly display their credentials, to respect patient's confidentiality and disclose any potential conflicts of interest (e.g. *KevinMD*[13]).

Blog posts, as was mentioned before, appear in chronological order, thus writers should strive to make blogs more organized in order to make the navigation through the site easier. This could be achieved either by organizing the blog topically (by adding different sections: physician, patient, health policy, health tips, audio, video etc) or by adding 'tags' that serve as keywords for the post (e.g. *Better Health*[14], see Figure 1).

The language of the posts depends on the readership, but more often than not, the audience are laypersons. With this in mind, authors should try to avoid technical language and rely on plain language (where possible). Instead of saying that herpes zoster is caused by varicella-zoster, it would be

Table 1:   Useful links for future medical bloggers

Topic	Links
Plain language	*Plain Language Medical Dictionary.* http://www.lib.umich.edu/plain-language-dictionary *How to write medical information in plain English* https://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/medicalguide.pdf *Medical Translator* http://www.iodine.com/translate
How-to guide	*How to Start a Blog* http://www.wikihow.com/Start-a-Blog *How To Start a Blog – Beginner's Guide for 2015* http://www.bloggingbasics101.com/how-do-i-start-a-blog/
Blogging platforms	*Blogger* https://www.blogger.com/ *WordPress* https://wordpress.com/
Medical search engines	*MedWorm* http://www.medworm.com/ *iMedisearch* http://www.imedisearch.com/ *WebMd* http://www.webmd.com/

better to say that shingles are caused by the chicken pox virus. If the author wishes to retain the technical terms, one can do so by adding them in parenthesis. This makes the posts more readable and also provides the audience with information for further research. Sentences should be clear and syntactically simple. Authors should avoid clusters of noun phrases, abbreviations, impersonal sentences, and reduce the use of passive. The language should be accessible to everyone, but not colloquial (avoid jargon).

For some useful links that could help you start a medical blog, see Table 1.

Conclusion

There is an abundance of medical information on the Internet. The most common are medical blogs, which come in diverse forms. The general idea behind these blogs is to familiarize different types of audiences about various medical topics (both professional and personal). The main challenge in writing a medical blog is to adapt the technical language in an understandable way for lay audiences. People who decide to use the Internet in order to find health-related information expect to find medical information in plain language. Since this type of information is of great importance to readers it is paramount to make those sources trustworthy and authentic, both in the form and content.

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