Foreword

Within the first decade-and-a-half of the 21st century, we have lived through little short of a revolution in the ways in which many people, in many parts of the world, obtain information and interact with each other (whether they be on opposite sides of the world or within the same room). Not only has the reality of such interactions changed rapidly, but so have people’s expectations, such that individuals from all age groups (not just Generation Y and their successors) have an expectation of “always on” Internet access, instant responses, and being able to find any information at the push of a button or swipe of a touchscreen – to such an extent that many exhibit signs akin to drug withdrawal symptoms if they are unable to do these things for even a short period.

However, while the increasing ubiquity of smart portable devices (such as smartphones, tablets, and similar devices that increasingly bridge the divide), of fast and “always on” Internet access, and social media applications have altered the ways in which many of us perform many common activities, from booking flights, holidays, hotels and restaurants, accessing news, consuming films and other “broadcast” media, they have had less impact on the ways in which most people access health services. It is only as people’s expectations have changed (if I can almost instantly book a hotel on the far side of the world online, they ask, then why can’t I book my doctor on the next street?) that we have seen the health services in many countries slowly begin to realise the potential and provide such services. Health services have long been seen by many as slow adopters of new technologies – and they seem, so far, to have been little different in terms of adopting, and adapting to, the challenges afforded by people’s expectations of their uses of social media and new technologies. Using new technologies to do things in different ways is, though, only one aspect of the ways in which social media, and the “always connected” potential of mobile devices, is changing people’s modes of communication and interaction. Crowdsourcing of opinion, for example through popular restaurant and hotel review sites, is used by many to choose where to eat and stay, and similar sites are being used, albeit slowly at present, to review people’s experiences of healthcare provision.

Much of the literature to date and many conference presentations on the use of social media and mobile technologies, however, have been and tend to remain at the level of opinion and even “hype,” and there exists a lack of demonstrated evidence from scientific work on the real benefits and impact of using new tools and technologies. Perhaps it is, to some degree, not surprising that we lack a substantive scientific literature at present. After all, many of the popular social networking tools are less than 10 years old, and more specialised variants for specific health purposes are even more recent. LinkedIn was launched in 2003, Facebook in 2004, and Twitter in 2006, while among the iconic mobile devices, the iPhone
was launched in 2007 and the iPad in 2010. Given the typical timeline from conception to publication of rigorous funded and peer-reviewed scientific studies, we are only now beginning to see published results from health professionals and researchers who have explored the reality of using such new tools. This volume begins to fill the gap, and hopefully will be an early example of a new era of research-based evidence for whether we can actually see significant benefit, behaviour change, or health impacts from the use of social media and mobile technologies in healthcare. As the editors note in their Preface, four main themes are addressed, each in itself important, but taken together help to introduce examples of the work that increasingly needs to be undertaken: 1) conceptual frameworks and models; 2) overview of the field; 3) real life implementations and cases; and 4) challenges and issues in social media and mobile technologies in healthcare. In addition to being useful for students, the 16 chapters will also provide food for thought for educators and researchers, and hopefully stimulate more exploration of the current status and issues surrounding the use of social media and mobile technologies in healthcare.

We are still in the early days of what we recognise as social media. One thing that we can be sure of is that the landscape will change increasingly rapidly. We will see the emergence of new social media applications – some may be designed specifically for health use, especially with the growing impact of citizens and patients driving both healthcare and health promotion, but more often we are likely to see the adaptation of more generic tools to health-related uses. We cannot be sure that some of the behemoths of the modern social media landscape will still be with us in 10-15 years, unless they adapt to the new and innovative uses to which they will undoubtedly be put; if they do not adapt, then others will rapidly fill the void. We will also likely see the emergence of new approaches to research into their use, perhaps based in more collaborative models of care and research, and almost certainly driven by the focus of citizens and patients, rather than the often-esoteric interests of traditional healthcare researchers. New research approaches will certainly need to be more agile, producing meaningful findings far more quickly than traditional methods.

It is also increasingly likely that the non-traditional and unexpected technology actors and providers will have an impact on the future, at least in respect of some areas of health and wellbeing promotion and provision; some of these may also impact traditional providers and be adopted by hospitals and other providers of institutional healthcare. At the time of writing this, the first glimpses and rumours are emerging of Apple’s new HealthBook App – will it be a game-changer, as so many Apple products have been, or will it be consigned to the dustbin of history along with Google Health? Only time will tell, but we can be certain that we will be living in very interesting times.

Might the combination of social media tools and approaches, together with mobile technologies, provide us, sometime in the near future, with the wherewithal to make a genuine contribution towards helping people achieve the goal of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, as defined by the World Health Organization? On their own, no technologies can achieve this, but if they can provide better ways of supporting access to and sharing knowledge, then social media and mobile technologies may speed the achievement of these goals. The examples of real use that are explored in this volume provide a valuable starting point from which to change health and healthcare for the better, for the benefit of all.

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