

Hospitals check into social media

Some health care sites are just getting used to the new ways to connect

By [Cathleen F. Crowley](#)

Updated 8:40 am, Saturday, November 24, 2012

Betty Jones, a laundry room employee at Glens Falls Hospital, celebrated 50 years of working at the hospital and 2,700 people clicked on her photo on the hospital's Facebook page. Matthew Van Pelt, Ellis Medicine's new social media specialist, posted a photo of the midnight opening of Ellis' new urgent care center in Clifton Park and it had 111 "likes" and 16 comments before he awoke the next morning.

Capital Region hospitals are dabbling in social media including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. Like many businesses, they grapple with the best way to use the platform, but they have stopped debating whether they need to.

"A hospital without an engaging social media presence soon may be viewed with the same suspicion as a business that has no Website," said a white paper by the Healthcare Association of New York State, which represents about 220 hospitals in New York.

The paper, titled "Health Care Social Media: Getting Executives on Board" cited research from a market research group that said "81 percent of consumers believe that if a hospital has a strong social media presence, it is likely to be more cutting edge."

Some of the nation's hospitals embraced social media early, especially children's hospitals. Boston Children's Hospital, for example, has 722,000 Facebook followers. The Capital Region's hospitals have fledgling initiatives. Albany Medical Center, which launched its Facebook page in 2010, has 4,000 followers who have "liked" its page; Ellis started last year and has 850 followers; Glens Falls Hospital has 500 followers and Saratoga has 860. St. Peter's Health Partners, perhaps sidetracked by the merger process, has no Facebook or Twitter activity.

Why does it matter?

About 60 percent of adults use the Internet to make health care decisions, and 62 percent of adult Internet users are on social media, according to "The Social Life of Health Information," a 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center.

The survey found that adults don't use social media for health decisions yet, but they follow their friend's trials with illness through social sites and watch video clips that explain medical procedures.

"Social network sites are not a significant source of health information for most people, but they can be a source of encouragement and care," the study said.

Most hospitals have not discovered the value of social media, said Andrea J. Simon, an

anthropologist and business strategy consultant who founded Simon Associates Management Consultants based in Westchester County.

"Social media provides an extremely powerful way of communicating: People trust you, and trust is extremely valuable," Simon said. "From a business perspective, (hospitals) are missing a great opportunity find people who would like to use them when they need them." Only 16 percent of hospitals are actively using social media, according to Simon's 2011 Second Annual Survey of Hospital Use of Social Media. The survey of 140 hospitals described the four main reasons hospitals avoid social media: patient privacy, employees wasting time on social media, not enough staffing to sustain a social media effort and fears of people talking about them online.

Negative comments are part of the package. A quick search of Facebook or Twitter on a given day turns up a handful of unpleasant comments about local hospitals.

In one, a dad complained about nurses misreading a chart and putting too much food through his newborn son's feeding tube. An irritated Twitter user derided a local hospital for hiring a physician who practices alternative medicine. A patient at Ellis Medicine's new urgent care center in Clifton Park griped about the wait because it was so busy.

Van Pelt, Ellis' social media guru, saw the post immediately at 10:50 p.m. and responded to the man within 5 minutes. The next morning, staff from the urgent care center contacted the man to talk about his concerns.

"I'm checking it 24/7," Van Pelt said. "I think it's fun and exciting."

Van Pelt didn't delete the post. Ellis follows the U.S. Airforce policy for removing posts on Facebook. Essentially, they only trash a comment if it has obscenities, is hurtful to someone or violates patient privacy.

"It's scary," said Darlene Olivieri Raynsford, director of communications for Glens Falls Hospital, who has an alert on her phone that tells her when someone has posted on the hospital's Facebook page. "It's losing control, especially in administration, where we want to control our message."

But Raynsford and other social media users note that the negative comments will be posted regardless of whether a business is there to respond. The policy at Glens Falls Hospital is to reach out to the commenter and try to talk to them off-line.

Social media is now woven into Glens Falls Hospital's communication strategy, Raynsford said.

"This is the way our community is communicating," she said. "You either embrace it or lose out on it."

Hospitals post announcements about new hires, employee awards, health tips, pictures of their newest medical devices and videos explaining medical procedures. Saratoga Hospital has seen

increased interest in fundraising events because of the buzz from people chatting on Facebook in the weeks leading up to an event.

"And then after the event, they have instant access to pictures, are able to express their opinions on how great the event was and share how they personally contributed to it," said Ellen Kerness, Saratoga's communications manager. "This has had a major positive impact."

Social media experts preach that the "return on investment" can be measured in clicks, donations and more business, but in the early stages it can be hard to see the cause and effect. It's like having an information desk or putting up signs, said Mike Pauley, the state hospital association's director of online strategy and e-communications. It's the cost of doing business. Elmer Streeter, director of communications for St. Peter's Health Partners, acknowledges that St. Peter's doesn't have a full-fledged social media presence yet. St. Peter's pays a company to monitor what people are saying about them on the Internet, and Catholic Health East — of which St. Peter's is a member — is developing policies for social media use, Streeter said. But he is hesitant to start posting on Facebook, Twitter and other sites before St. Peter's has the staff to maintain it.

Proponents of social media say it is a communications tool that can build trust and relationships with the consumers and potential customers.

As Pauley from the state hospital association said, "You fish where the fish are."

ccrowley@timesunion.com • 518-454-5348 • @cathleencrowley •
<http://facebook.com/cathleenFcrowley>

@socialmedia

Here's a look at how many people are following local hospitals on three social media networks:

Hospital	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube
Albany Medical Center	4,188	0	45
Glens Falls Hospital	189	40	13
Saratoga Hospital	860	447	0
St. Peter's Health Partners	0	0	52