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Facebook Use by Peruvian Physicians: Exposing Private Life to Patients

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Facebook, a social networking service with over 100 million unique users, is widely established in many contexts around the world. A significant number of physicians have opened Facebook accounts [1, 2], which is resulting in major ramifications for the medical profession.

To investigate Facebook use by physicians, in June 2010, we e-mailed an anonymous questionnaire to 2,045 Peruvian physicians, with a response rate of 6% (121/2,045). Of the 121 physicians, 72 (60%) had a Facebook profile, and 14% of those (10/72) referred to their patients as 'friends'. According to multivariate analysis, being 30 years old or younger (odds ratio, OR: 4.4; 95% CI: 1.6–12.3), having access to the Internet at home (OR: 11.7; 95% CI: 1.3–106.5) and using the Internet more than 25 h weekly (OR: 3.1; 95% CI: 1.1–8.8) were the factors associated with the use of Facebook. Gender, smartphone use and previous experience of conducting research or publishing were not associated factors in bivariate analysis.

Facilities for Internet access and overwhelming use in and of itself can explain the affinity many people have for this social network. As previously reported, use of Facebook is more common among young doctors [2, 3]. Although we did not evaluate the characteristics of their Facebook accounts (privacy settings, uploaded personal information and photographs), many young doctors exposed potentially embarrassing situations or unprofession-

al behavior such as alcohol consumption, and revealed other sensitive aspects of their personal lives on Facebook, thereby making them available for observation by patients, as previously reported [1–4]. In this scenario, Facebook could play a key role in transforming the doctor-patient relationship: becoming aware of the doctor's past and habits in everyday life beyond the consultation room might well compromise the professional relationship between doctor and patient [4].

In summary, a major proportion of our biased sample of Peruvian physicians have Facebook accounts and have patients as their Facebook 'friends'. In light of this situation, medical schools and/or major health care institutions should outline and implement guidelines for the use of Facebook and other online social network utilities, identifying those practices which may potentially be prejudicial to the establishment and maintenance of a good doctor-patient relationship.

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