EDITORIAL

DEBORAH K. MAYER, PhD, RN, AOCN®, FAAN—EDITOR

Social Networking in Cancer Care

A good friend of mine died recently after a sudden and brief illness. One of the things that helped those of us who cared for and about her was the use of the social networking Web site, LotsaHelpingHands (www.lotsahelpinghands.com). The site enabled us to provide updates to her family and friends near and far, receive messages from them, coordinate her care, and help the family with food and child care. It also saved the family from being bombarded by well-wishers and people who wanted to help in some way during their time of acute crisis. It was amazing how quickly word spread. Within a day of the site going live, more than 150 people across the United States had signed up and all of the requests for help over the month were spoken for.

When my friend was in the hospital, I showed her Web site to one of her nurses. The nurse was not aware of these free Web-based communities and said they would be especially helpful for patients with large or extended families. The Web site also gave the nurse a greater sense of who my friend was and all the friends and family supporting her from afar. I have participated in similar Web sites that help me keep in touch without burdening my friends (the patients) or their families. Have you heard of them or used them? Have your patients?

Social networking sites allow users to communicate—regardless of location and time of day—and share pictures, videos, and other information. Facebook, Twitter, and Classmates.com are general social networking platforms. Hundreds of these sites have been developed since the late 1990s, but some, including CaringBridge, CarePages, and LotsaHelpingHands, are especially useful when facing an illness such as cancer. The sites were developed out of the need for people to stay connected with family and friends during health crises. The sites are free and easy to set up, provide open and private communication, and offer functions such as posting pictures and requests for tasks or assistance with activities. In addition, patients and families who have a personal site can limit membership and control content.

More than 74% of Americans have access to and use the Internet at home (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2009), yet many may not use the Web, including some of our older and less advantaged patients. How can we help them with linking to and getting support from their family and friends? You might encourage them to develop a telephone tree and a point person to initiate or field calls to give updates and send out requests on the patient's behalf. Some hospitals and outpatient treatment areas offer computers with Internet access to allow patients to communicate with family and friends.

Over the cancer continuum from diagnosis through end-of-life care, the patient and family will have many issues to contend with and may find the experience overwhelming. Most of us find asking for help difficult, but letting others give help can be a gift to those who care as well as those who receive it.

Many people want to help. I encourage nurses to learn more about social networking Web sites and make sure that patients and their families know about them, too. Doing so will facilitate

Courtesy of Brian Strickland

Social networking sites allow users to communicate regardless of location and time of day. Have you used them? Have your patients?

the support that is so necessary when facing cancer. For my friend and her family and friends, www.lotsahelping hands.com was an amazing resource that kept us connected during a very difficult time.

The author takes full responsibility for the content of the article. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the author or editorial staff.

Author Contact: Deborah K. Mayer, PhD, RN, AOCN®, FAAN, can be reached at CJONEditor@ons.org.

Reference

Miniwatts Marketing Group. (2009). Internet users and statistics for North America. Retrieved from http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats2.htm