

# Social Media and Health Literacy

By **Helen Osborne, MEd, OTR/L** / President of Health Literacy Consulting, Natick, Massachusetts, and founder of Health Literacy Month

**W**hat exactly are social media? I wonder about that sometimes. If social media are limited to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the like, then I'm not a big fan or frequent user.

But if social media are defined more broadly, count me in! In my way of viewing it, social media include all sorts of electronic communications that are interactive, immediate, and often inclusive of more formats than just the written (ahem, typed) word.

Social media can be a powerful tool for health literacy—helping medical writers, clinicians, and other professionals communicate health information in ways that patients and the public can understand. Social media also can be a wonderful way for professionals or patients to directly communicate with one another.

Here are examples of ways that social media can enhance the work of health literacy. As you can see, there are abundant opportunities for medical writers to get involved.

## Social media to help professionals learn from each other:

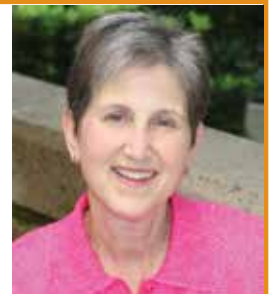
- **Health Literacy Discussion List.** This list is hosted by the Institute for Healthcare Advancement (IHA). Honestly, I don't think I'd be nearly as savvy about health literacy if it wasn't for this online discussion group. It's been a constant presence in my business life for many years. (I once co-moderated this list. Now Julie McKinney does a stellar job.) Participants include health literacy researchers, practitioners, teachers, and advocates worldwide. Topics range from plain language basics to good sources for health images to higher-level concepts such as links between health literacy and social justice. How does this fit into my definition of social media? Discussion can be immediate, with many postings a day, though sometimes a week goes by without any. While not exactly multimedia, postings often include links to articles and videos. What

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Helen brings clinical experience, educational training, and the patient perspective to all her work. She speaks about health literacy at conferences worldwide. She also serves as a plain language writer/editor on a wide range of health-related materials. Helen is the author of several books, including the AMWA award-winning *Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message, Second Edition*, which is considered by many as the most important health literacy text today.

To learn more about Helen's work, please visit the Health Literacy Consulting website at [www.healthliteracy.com](http://www.healthliteracy.com). You can also listen to her Health Literacy Out Loud podcast interviews at [www.healthliteracyoutloud.org](http://www.healthliteracyoutloud.org).



does this mean for medical writers? Those who write consumer-facing medical materials no doubt are expected to be savvy about health literacy and plain language. This free online discussion group is a great forum to post questions, search the archives, and learn about best practices. Here's the link: <https://www.iha4health.org/our-services/health-literacy-discussion-list>.

- **Health Literacy Out Loud (HLOL) podcasts.** At the risk of being self-serving, I want to mention this no-cost way for medical writers to stay up to date about issues related to health literacy, patient education, and health communication. I started this series in 2008 and have since posted more than 165 audio interviews with those “in the know” about health literacy. In about 20 minutes, you get to hear my conversations with experts about what to do, why to do it, and how to learn more about many aspects of health communication. Many listeners tell me that these podcasts help them stay current with research and practice. You can access all HLOL podcasts and many of the transcripts at [www.healthliteracyoutloud.org](http://www.healthliteracyoutloud.org).

#### **Social media to help health professionals share information with patients:**

- **Texting.** Today, patients (perhaps with caregivers) are responsible for the majority of day-to-day health care. This includes making decisions about what to eat, taking medications as directed, and keeping up with all needed appointments. Texting is now being used as a way to help. One example is Text4Baby, a free service that sends to-be and new moms timely messages about prenatal care and a baby’s development in the first year. This service was created by several reputable agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its use and effectiveness have been well researched. Why does this form of social media matter to medical writers? While projects like these can outwardly seem simple, there are many aspects that could benefit from skilled and savvy medical writers. Perhaps there are opportunities to help with programs like these. Here is the link to Text4baby: <https://text4baby.org>.
- **OpenNotes.** As described on its website, “OpenNotes is the international movement dedicated to making health care more open and transparent by urging doctors, nurses, therapists, and others to share their visit notes with patients.” This system of sharing a patient’s medical information is used in the Veteran’s Health Administration and is being adopted in hospitals and health centers across the United States. What role is there for medical writers? To make sense of their doctor’s notes, patients need to understand medical terms and concepts. When writing patient education materials, you can help by clearly defining key terms and then consistently using the same terms throughout. It’s not always clear which

to use. For instance, after explaining that “hypertension” and “high blood pressure” mean nearly the same thing, you and others on the writing team need to weigh which term would be more helpful to readers. Learn more about Open Notes at <https://www.opennotes.org>.

#### **Social media for patients and caregivers to communicate with each other:**

- **Twitter, Facebook, etc.** It’s almost inevitable that each of us will someday have a serious illness or find ourselves caring for someone who is sick. This experience can be scary and overwhelming. We may feel alone. Twitter, Facebook, and other social media offer ways for patients and caregivers to connect with, and support, each other. For example, Twitter has a growing number of tweet chat exchanges that use the same hashtag (#) to focus on a specific topic. A good place to find lists of hashtags, tweet chats, and more is the Healthcare Hashtag Project, <https://www.symplur.com/healthcare-hashtags>. Facebook, too, is a way for individuals to post updates and allow others to express support by commenting, liking, and sharing. What’s the relevance of these to medical communicators? Well, there’s the personal part of course. There’s also value for us as professionals. Regardless of our audience, it helps to frame medical information in the context of the patients’ experience of illness. My guru on using social media this way is Pamela Katz Ressler, MS, RN, HNB-BC. I encourage you to watch this video of Pam leading a panel discussion at Stanford Medicine X, “Communicating the Experience of Chronic Illness in the Digital Age”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBdYLhiucnE&feature=youtu.be>.
- **CaringBridge.** This website offers a way for seriously ill patients and their friends, family, and caregivers to connect about issues they are going through now. This free service is not only convenient but also informative and interactive. Why is it of value to medical writers? None of us are exempt from illness, whether we are the ones who are sick or the ones caring for others. Medical writers can help by sharing news about useful, reputable social media sources like this. Here’s the link: <https://www.caringbridge.org>

Health literacy is about communicating health information in ways that people can understand. Today, that includes using social media for learning and sharing. It’s a powerful way we all can take health literacy action.