The Rise of Blogs in Nursing Practice

Joni Watson, MSN, MBA, RN, OCN®

The number of blogs and related online activities continues to grow exponentially each year. Patients increasingly are turning to the Internet for personalized, timely, and relevant health information; blogs remain a large source of that information. Nurses and other healthcare professionals can harness the informational, educational, networking, and supportive power of blogs, as well, and should understand how to access and use blogs for professional use.

And lately, the faces of the uninsured are morphing in front of me. They aren’t dressed in dirty socks and flannel shirts. Now I see unfunded patients with expensive college degrees who used to have jobs, and they are parents of a child or two, as lay-offs create a new kind of uninsured patient. Will I be asked to choose which kind of unfunded patient gets care, as resources dry up? This is the moral monster underneath the bed I fear, and even with the lights turned on; it’s not my imagination.

— JParadisiRN, 2011

About 450 million English-language weblogs, or “blogs,” are estimated to exist, though the exact number is difficult to determine because of the number of blogs created and deleted daily, as well as the number of inactive blogs currently in existence (Haynes, 2010). With free, user-friendly software such as WordPress and Blogger enabling anyone to create and host a blog, the blogosphere, or world of blogs, continues to grow rapidly. Blog is also a verb, meaning to write or update posts in a blog site. Nine percent of all adults within the United States blog and 24% read blogs (Smith, 2008). Fourteen percent of U.S. children aged 12-17 years who use the Internet have blogs, and, as of 2010, the Pew Research Center found blog postings by younger bloggers had dropped since the previous survey in 2008, as the number of microblogging sites increased (Kopytoff, 2011). Specifically, blogs related to the health industry are a growing phenomenon (Miller & Pole, 2010).

My blogging adventure started as I cautiously and occasionally began to read blogs about topics of interest. I did not think I could add one more information source, as I already had a growing tower of paper information precariously balanced on the corner of my desk. Sometimes, I likened the blogosphere to a “blob”—an amorphous creature growing bigger and bigger as it consumes everything in its path. Quite frankly, I thought blogs were just too much for me. However, any sort of status update via Facebook, Twitter, or any type of wiki page already made me a microblogger. I was sharing information with the world. No longer did colleagues have to search for me to hear about my institution’s central line dressing change policy; I was pushing this information out to others, and vice versa. The same is true for everyone. Information is gathered from a variety of sources, and blogging is simply another way to get that information.

Prevalence of Blogs

The flow of information changed during the last decade with the rise of interconnectedness via blogs, social networks, and rapidly changing technology. Not that long ago, people would sit down at a computer and go to the Internet to visit their favorite Web sites and obtain the information they needed or wanted. That has changed. Now, because of Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, information available from favorite sources, including blogs, is sent directly to an RSS reader, such as Google™ Reader, or straight to an e-mail inbox. Microblogging platforms such as Twitter provide updates in 140 characters or less, often breaking news faster than mainstream media. With more than 845 million active users worldwide communicating in more than 70 languages, Facebook, the simple status update social media giant, is integrated into nearly seven million applications and Web sites via “Likes,” comments, and link-sharing (Facebook, 2012). Blogs are now a main current within the continuous and direct information stream.

Although limited data exist on the number of nurses and other healthcare professionals blogging and reading blogs, Buist and Carpenter (2009) found that blog content tended to vary by blogger credentials and blog host. For example, WebMD blogs were authored solely by credentialed healthcare professionals and contained substantial health information as opposed to responses to media and current events, whereas independently hosted healthcare blogs were authored by a mix of credentialed and noncredentialed bloggers and contained far less medical information and more posts in response to mainstream media topics (Buist & Carpenter, 2009). In another study, Miller and Pole (2010) examined 951 health-related blogs. They
found that two-thirds of bloggers held a master's or doctorate degree, and that bloggers were female and more likely to be younger, with an average age of about 36 years. Of the blogs reviewed in their study, 43% were authored by physicians and 20% by nurses.

Blogs are a personalized, timely, and relevant way to receive information and foster communication. However, with 170 million blogs available, concentrating the available information to meet the needs of the reader is essential. Blogs usually are niche reading, so they should be selected and tailored for the reader. With blogs, everyone is an educator, sharing unique perspectives on the world and events. In addition to personalization, blogs are timely and relevant; stories and information sometimes break faster on blogs than on traditional media. The entire point of blogs is to share the blog posts via networks, including blogs, to ask questions and read the experiences of other survivors (Dolce, 2011).

Nurses benefit from blogs in the same ways patients do, but nurses do not have to blog themselves to participate in the information stream. Quite simply, nurses can search for blogs, subscribe to and read them, and then share the information.

Getting Started

The easiest way to search for blogs is to start with one such as the Oncology Nursing Society’s “Re:Connect” blog, which accompanies the monthly print publication, ONS Connect (see Figure 1). Another trusted and well-respected nurse blog, the American Journal of Nursing’s “Off the Charts,” has an extensive list of other blogs, or a blogroll. Most blogs have a blogroll, so you can peruse through blogs likely reading to find relevant reading materials to get started with your own search for information.

After searching through blogs, you can subscribe to blogs that meet specific needs or wants. Remember, through RSS feeds, new blog posts in the selected blogs may be sent to an e-mail inbox or RSS reader. Some people prefer an RSS reader to e-mail subscriptions because good blogs generally update regularly, creating an overwhelming number of e-mails. An RSS reader, such as Google Reader or FeedDemon, collects all the information for later access. By logging into the RSS reader, you can access the information when you have time. To subscribe to a blog, look for the “subscribe” button on the relevant blog; it will offer different ways to subscribe to the information feeds, whether via e-mail or various RSS readers (you can unsubscribe in a similar manner).

After subscribing to a few blogs, you can read the posts. Once you have the information, do something with it. You can “like,” rate, and comment on blog posts, a highly encouraged behavior. Bloggers want to engage readers, have meaningful conversations, share information with others, and learn from them, so comment on whatever you are reading. Often, the blogger will respond back, and a dialogue begins. As with all other encounters, nurses and nursing students using blogs within and outside of practice must remain vigilant of professional standards. The American Nurses Association (ANA, 2011) recently released the Social Networking Principles Toolkit, which provides guidance to nursing professionals interacting with social media sites, including blogs. Principles include refraining from posting individually identifiable patient information, observing professional nurse-patient boundaries, understanding that others—including patients, coworkers, and employers—may see postings, separating professional and personal information online, as well as using online security settings, informing authorities of harmful content, and participating in the development of social media conduct guidelines within workplaces (ANA, 2011). Nursing professionals’ online presence is just as important to maintain as face-to-face interactions.

The final way to participate in blogging without actually being the blogger is to share the blog posts via networks, both social and traditional. Social networking is pervasive in the Information Age, as people want to share and learn within them. The entire point of blogs is to share information and associated dialogue about that information with others. A surprising amount of dialogue is created within microblogging and social networking platforms. Do not forget to share the information with others traditionally.
Conclusion

The nursing blogosphere continues to grow daily. Numerous nurse bloggers share wonderful information, and a lot of amazing patient advocates and cancer survivors also blog. Blogs are great places to find case studies of interventions or to query other healthcare professionals about their experiences. Including blogs in scholarly publications is becoming increasingly common. Blogs may be quoted or referenced within presentations, articles, and grant proposals; they may help increase evidence-based practices within institutions via online journal clubs and other strategies (Lehna, Berger, Truman, Goldman, & Topp, 2010). In addition, when healthcare professionals read or write blogs, they may find doing so to be cathartic, a coping mechanism in itself (Miller & Pole, 2010). Similarly, engaging in the blogosphere may be a required part of healthcare professional education, to chronicle clinical experiences (similar to traditional journaling), foster reflection, and develop critical-thinking skills (Chretien, Goldman, & Faselis, 2008; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011).

Blogs allow nurses another opportunity to learn from others. Although they are a source of education in and of themselves, blogs also provide a platform to educate others, whether through traditional blogging, microblogging via social networks, or commenting. They allow individuals a chance to share their stories, connect people with one another, and provide opportunities to influence health care and health policy as advocates for others (Kovic, Lulic, & Brumini, 2008).

After diving into the blogosphere, I realized that blogs do not consume me like the amorphous “blob.” I consume them. I control them and the flow of information. Reading everything is impossible; however, just find the blogs that best fit your wants, needs, and patient population, and scan the available information. Blogs continue to grow within health care, bringing a brand new, brilliant world of information to nursing practice and patient care.

References


For Exploration on the Go

Access the American Nurses Association’s mobile Web site and search for the Social Networking Principles Toolkit, which establishes guidelines for how nurses can maintain professional standards in the social media realm, by opening a barcode scanner on your smartphone. Point your phone at the code and take a photo. Your phone will link to the content automatically. Access the content directly at http://nursingworld.org/FunctionalMenuCategories/AboutANA/Social-Media/Social-Networking-Principles-Toolkit.