

SOCIETY *of* BEHAVIORAL MEDICINE

Better Health Through Behavior Change

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE
2:25 p.m. Eastern Time
Thursday, April 24, 2014

CONTACTS
Sherry Pagoto, PhD, (617) 877-0923
Sherry.pagoto@umassmed.edu

Lisa Larsen
University of Massachusetts Medical School Media Relations
Lisa.larsen@umassmed.edu

Usability and Feasibility of a Twitter Social Network for Weight Loss

Philadelphia, PA – People are increasingly using online social networks to interact with others about health, weight loss, and fitness. Research shows that people find the support and camaraderie of online friends helpful as they try to lose weight. In a study presented at the Society of Behavioral Medicine on April 24 by Dr. Sherry Pagoto, Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, her team of investigators tested whether they could provide professional weight loss counseling via Twitter, an online social network. A group of patients were enrolled and could receive guidance, information and advice from clinicians via tweets. The average weight loss was 7.69 lbs in 12 weeks. Having clinicians interact with patients online may be an economical model for preventive care.

How were patients counseled on Twitter? A group of 12 obese patients were shown how to open Twitter accounts so they could participate in the program. All accounts were set on “private” meaning only group members and coaches could view interactions. On a daily basis, 2 clinicians tweeted links to professionally-written blog posts describing behavioral weight loss strategies, weight loss success stories, and healthy recipes and exercise plans to the group of patients. They also tweeted advice, positive reinforcement, encouragement, and questions to individual patients and/or the group. A successful peer who lost 60 lbs also helped coach and motivate patients. Participants were asked to use My Fitness Pal, a commercial mobile app to track their diet and set it to automatically tweet daily updates to increase opportunities for positive reinforcement around their diet tracking.

Did people lose weight? Yes! After 12 weeks the average weight loss was 7.69 lbs and none of the patients dropped out of the program.

Could this be an economical to deliver preventive care? Each clinician logged in 1-2 times a day for a total of 5 minutes to field tweeted questions, post links, and tweet encouragement, which resulted in 70 minutes of clinician time per week to treat 12 patients. Clinicians logged in during brief down moments of the day and were feasibly able to do so 7 days a week from their mobile phones. “The clinicians found “tweet-sized visits” to be far more convenient for their schedules than clinic visits,” says Dr. Pagoto. “Patients also saved time and money given they did not have to take time off work, commute to the medical center, and pay for parking to receive care. Patients are increasingly embracing social media as a means to communicate with each other, but the healthcare system has barely scratched the surface when it comes to leveraging social media as a way to deliver care.” The investigators are now working on a large trial of this clinical delivery model.

The Society of Behavioral Medicine is a multidisciplinary organization of clinicians, educators, and scientists dedicated to promoting the study of the interactions of behavior with biology and the environment and the application of that knowledge to improve the health and well being of individuals, families, communities, and populations. www.sbm.org

This study was presented during the 2014 Annual Meeting and Scientific Session of the Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) from April 23-26, 2014 in Philadelphia, PA. However, it does not reflect the policies or the opinion of the SBM. This symposium presentation was held on April 24th. Given that this study was presented at a scientific meeting, the data and conclusions reached should be regarded as preliminary, until they are published in a peer-reviewed journal. Funding agencies played no role in this study. There are no conflicts of interest for the investigators.

###