LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Intersection of Online Social Networking with Medical Professionalism: Can Medicine Police the Facebook Boom?

To the Editor:—Dr. Thompson and colleagues present original data¹ about the use of Facebook among residents and medical students. Importantly, they argue that medical education needs to address the burgeoning world of online, publicly-available personal information exemplified by Facebook accounts. We argue, however, that it is insufficient to address the issue through medical schools and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME); this is a larger issue that needs the attention of medicine as a culture and a profession.

The authors' data suggest that Facebook accounts may soon become prevalent among a large number of medical students, residents of all years, and attending physicians. Thompson et al. show that 20% to 30% of all medical students and first through third year residents have a Facebook account. Only in the more senior residency years does the prevalence of Facebook accounts fall off: 10% in fourth year residents and ultimately 0% in sixth year residents. Although possible, it is unlikely that residents had Facebook accounts early in their training, but then closed their accounts later in residency. Instead, the relative absence of Facebook accounts in senior years of residency is likely a cohort effect. Facebook, which began in 2004 as a way for college students to communicate, has grown rapidly to more than 90 million active users². By nature of being a social network embedded in colleges and active for only the last four years, more senior residents likely do not have accounts simply because they were too old to be caught in Facebook's rise in popularity. A reasonable prediction is that as junior residents advance in training, we will see an increased prevalence of Facebook accounts in senior residents, presumably as high as the 20 to

30% seen in medical students. If the current trend holds true, the large prevalence of Facebook users will soon include young faculty and junior attendings.

As the authors conclude, there is a role for medical schools, residency programs, and the ACGME in providing trainees with sound advice around the use of social networking sites. However, the increasing incidence of Facebook usage among all physicians calls for a broader discussion across medicine's organizing and accrediting bodies. Organizations such as the AMA should facilitate a national conversation and the production of general guidelines for all physicians to draw upon when posting and sharing personal information on online social network sites.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors have no conflict of interest to report, financial or otherwise, as it relates to this current work.*

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J Gen Intern Med 23(12):2155

DOI: 10.1007/s11606-008-0810-y

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Published online October 2, 2008