Are medicine and media a compatible pair? Medicine, at its core, values privacy, confidentiality, and professionalism. On the other hand, most forms of media thrive on transparency, dissemination of knowledge, and—at times—informality, especially with the rise of social media. Despite (or perhaps due to) these differences, medicine has been a longstanding subject of interest in the media and the two work closely alongside each other. Newspapers and scientific journals report on the latest medical breakthroughs and rare disease case reports shared by healthcare professionals and researchers. Television and radio programs disseminate a variety of health-related messages, from advertisements of health products to public health campaigns such as Stop Overdose BC. The internet contains a wealth of information that is just a click away.

The impact of media on medicine has been magnified in the last decade with the surge of social media. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube that began as means for social networking and content sharing have now developed into ubiquitous media giants with billions of active monthly users, including patients as well as current and future healthcare professionals. According to national surveys conducted in the United States and Canada, approximately 40% of practicing physicians reported using Facebook or other forms of online social media, with markedly higher usage rates of 79% and 93% among the younger cohorts of resident physicians and medical students, respectively. The pervasiveness of social media makes it a convenient and powerful tool that can affect healthcare decisions made by patients, doctors, and policymakers. When used appropriately, social media can increase awareness and share knowledge among the lay and medical audience, as exemplified by the Movember initiative or Twitter hashtags used by researchers at major scientific meetings to garner peers’ attention for their work. However, the interaction between social media and medicine can blur the professional boundary of patient-physician relationships and raise concerns of patient privacy and confidentiality. The ease of accessibility to social media can also be abused to spread misinformation and propagate false beliefs, as seen by the anti-vaccination movement today. In this issue’s feature articles section, clinician investigator program fellow Dr. Gillian Goobie discusses the impact of social media on dissemination of information and patient-physician relationships in the context of specific illnesses.

Certain healthcare fields and their patients have embraced different forms of media to improve care and service accessibility. Patients living with chronic diseases, such as cystic fibrosis and chronic kidney disease, make use of social media groups to connect, find peer and medical support, and build advocacy programs for new treatments or patient engagement. This topic is explored in a joint feature by Dr. Mark Gilbert, Dr. Gina Ogilvie, and their teams from BC Centre for Disease Control, which discusses the development of two digital health interventions aimed to improve access to sexual and reproductive health screening, as well as the realistic opportunities and challenges of incorporating such resources in today’s care. Lastly, this issue features a discussion of a text message-based prenatal education program developed by Dr. Patricia Janssen and her team at the UBC School of Population and Public Health. This mobile health program for expecting mothers again underscores the fact that multiple healthcare resources facilitated by media are currently being used to serve various populations in British Columbia.

Despite their seemingly conflicting values, medicine and media may be inseparable in this interconnected society. As you read this issue, we invite you to reflect on the impact of media in your life as a medical student, healthcare professional, researcher, or everyday consumer of information.

Conflict of interest
The authors have declared no conflict of interest.

References

MD Program, Faculty of Medicine, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Correspondence to
Seo Am Hur (seoam.hur@alumni.ubc.ca)
Christine Wang (christinewang@alumni.ubc.ca)