

Young physicians on YouTube: helping patients connect with health care

Lauren Rietchel¹

Citation: UBCMJ. 2020; 11.2 (38-39)

Abstract

Medical channels, created by young physicians on YouTube, are popular sources of medical information. They may help demystify the vast world of clinical knowledge and empower patients to seek help from their professional healthcare providers. By understanding clinical decision-making and the complexities of healthcare systems from an online physician's perspective, patients may be more understanding of their own physician's clinical rationale. This may lead to better communication with their doctor and an improved therapeutic alliance. Despite the conveniences in overcoming patient barriers through this format, medical advice should continue to maintain professional standards of clinical practice and strive to reach only the intended audience.

There is a growing community of young physicians on YouTube, often under or around 30 years of age, who run successful medical channels targeting the general population.¹ Although not standardized,² common themes include general medical entertainment for a public audience, synopses of daily life for various medical specialties, and medical information or advice.¹ Some physicians even describe thought processes behind clinical decision-making, a component patients have expressed greater demand for since the rise of collaborative decision-making and patient autonomy.³ For those seeking a medical opinion, the internet is one of the first resources accessed for guidance and research prior to consulting in-person medical advice.⁴⁻⁷ However, a lack of health literacy (the knowledge to make good health decisions) among patients has been identified as a major global healthcare challenge.⁸ While a study that evaluated highly formal medical channels on YouTube (with educational videos on different diseases) found a large benefit to patients in this regard,⁹ the following commentary proposes that more casual individual physician YouTube channels can show a similar benefit to patients through demystification of the medical profession, which may ultimately benefit patients by 1) increasing their trust in physicians; 2) improving their satisfaction with health care; and 3) providing an updated, refreshing approach to accessing a younger generation of patients. This commentary will also address some of the ideas that may be explored in future research on these types of channels.

Doctor Mike, a family physician on YouTube based out of New York City,¹⁰ is an example of how transparency in medicine can be built with an online community of people. With 4.26 million followers,¹⁰ he is able to answer inquiries directly from subscribers, explain medical advice in a clear and explicit way, and promote healthy living to an audience equivalent to a population almost twice as large as that in the Greater Vancouver area.^{11,12} His videos include himself explaining why vaccines are important and why certain symptoms should prompt a person to seek medical advice.^{13,14} He educates patients with evidence-based research and shares medical stories that explain the daily clinical decision-making processes within a physician's mind, such as the approach in deciding whether to prescribe an antibiotic to a patient

or not.¹⁵ He fosters a trustworthy community that arguably allows people to feel confident seeking out advice from their own doctor. Patients may be hesitant to trust the opinion of just one doctor,¹⁶ so if a patient completes prior research or understands decision-making processes better through these other physician videos, then they may feel more comfortable with their in-person physician offering similar opinions. One study assessing the patient-physician relationship found that the knowledge level of a patient was highly correlated to their trust in their physician.¹⁷ A high level of trust was found to be related to higher adherence, higher satisfaction with care, and better health outcomes overall.¹⁷ By increasing the transparency of medical decision-making and medical recommendations through these types of YouTube channels, patients may feel a greater sense of trust in the healthcare system and in their own providers, possibly strengthening their own patient-physician relationship. It can also be expected that there may be a greater sense of accountability within the medical community for healthcare professionals to stay up-to-date and continue to deliver high-quality care if patients are able to access this type of information online.

Another frequent theme of the young physician YouTube community is the explanation and portrayal of residency training. A popular YouTube resident physician, Violin MD,¹⁸ shows the daily life of an internal medicine resident, including a first-person perspective of the grueling and frequent 26-hour call schedule,¹⁹ encounters with difficult decision-making, and complex multidisciplinary patient care. When the general population watches this exhilarating yet exhausting lifestyle through an accessible platform like YouTube, patients may develop greater understanding and empathy towards their own busy physician. They may be more appreciative of the uncertainties and delays in medicine when a physician runs late or needs to order an additional test, and recognize their doctor's imperfections (e.g., in the context of mistakes and the breakdown in patient care). Greater connection with and understanding of a physician leads to higher patient satisfaction with healthcare,¹⁷ which is supported by the observation that the primary reason for physician complaints is a breakdown of communication with a physician, not that physician's medical knowledge.²⁰ With an increased appreciation of the medical profession through these kinds of YouTube videos, patient satisfaction with care might increase, and the incidence of filed complaints against physicians may decrease. A topic of further research could aim to describe the relationship between use of physician video media platforms and the frequency and/or type of malpractice complaints.

¹MD Program, Faculty of Medicine, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Correspondence to
Lauren Rietchel (laurenrietchel@alumni.ubc.ca)

Since physicians posting on these online platforms are often young, this refreshed approach to medicine may make it more accessible to groups often missed in the healthcare system. Young adults aged 18–25 are the least accessible group in medicine,²¹ frequenting physicians only in extreme circumstances,²¹ and perhaps could be accessed with the assistance of this type of video platform. When the importance of visiting the doctor or the complexities of the medical system are explained, barriers to care for this demographic may decrease, which might even increase the rate of physician visits. While further research is required to address this topic, young people may not feel fully comfortable with their primary care doctor until after they find information on a streaming platform where a younger doctor is able to empower them to seek out medical care.

The young medical community on YouTube may also present challenges, including adherence to patient confidentiality and the maintenance of professional behavior. This is an important aspect to consider, as one major concern of the internet is the dissemination of unprofessional topics and behaviours reaching an unintended audience.²² The content depicted, if deemed unprofessional, can exert a large influence on the opinions of patients worldwide and should be carefully monitored.²² As well, if a patient mistakenly thinks their medical issue is resolved by watching a video and does not attend a medical appointment as a result, then these channels could even be viewed as harmful if they cause a delay for necessary medical care.

If patients are able to understand that the purpose of the YouTube physician community is to educate the general public and promote healthcare, and that visiting an in-person healthcare professional is an important step in health management, then improved patient-physician and patient-healthcare system relationships are anticipated. Formal research should be conducted on the benefits and harms of informal medical channels on YouTube, as well as their ultimate impact on patient care and the therapeutic alliance, given that this platform reaches such a large audience. A formalized evaluation and rating system of individual physician YouTube channels would help bring credibility to this platform as a resource for medical knowledge.

Conflict of interest

The author has declared no conflict of interest.

References

1. Travelingrockstars.com [Internet]. Unknown: Traveling Rockstars; 2019. Top 15 Doctor Youtubers to Follow in 2019; 2019 Jul 4 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://travelingrockstars.com/top-15-doctor-youtubers-to-follow-in-2019/>
2. Gabarron E, Fernandez-Luque L, Armayones M, Lau AY. Identifying measures used for assessing quality of YouTube videos with patient health information: a review of current literature. *Interact J Med Res*. 2013;2(1):e6.
3. Deber RB, Kraetschmer N, Urowitz S, Sharpe N. Do people want to be autonomous patients? Preferred roles in treatment decision-making in several patient populations. *Health Expect*. 2007 Sep;10(3):248–58.
4. Lim Fat MJ, Doja A, Barrowman N, Sell E. YouTube videos as a teaching tool and patient resource for infantile spasms. *J Child Neurol*. 2011 Jul;26(7):804–9.
5. Stellefson M, Chaney B, Ochipa K, Chaney D, Haider Z, Hanik B, Chavarria E, Bernhardt JM. YouTube as a source of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease patient education: a social media content analysis. *Chron Respir Dis*. 2014 May;11(2):61–71.
6. Atkinson N, Saperstein S, Pleis J. Using the internet for health-related activities: findings from a national probability sample. *J Med Internet Res*. 2009;11(1):e5.
7. Rutten LJ, Squiers L, Hesse B. Cancer-related information seeking: hints from the 2003 Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS). *J Health Commun*. 2006 Feb 1;11(s1):147–56.
8. Nutbeam D, Kickbusch I. Advancing health literacy: a global challenge for the 21st century. *Health Promot Int*. 2000 Sep 1;15(3):183–4.
9. Desai T, Shariff A, Dhingra V, Minhas D, Eure M, Kats M. Is content really king? An objective analysis of the public's response to medical videos on YouTube. *PLoS One*. 2013 Dec 18;8(12):e82469.
10. Doctor Mike. About [Internet]. USA: Doctor Mike; 2016 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0QHWhjbe5fGJEPz3sVb6nw/>
11. DoctorMike. Playlists [Internet]. USA: Doctor Mike; 2016 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0QHWhjbe5fGJEPz3sVb6nw/playlists>
12. Statistics Canada. Population and Dwelling Count Highlight Tables. Canada: Statistics Canada; 2017 Feb 8, 1.
13. Doctor Mike. The Thing About Vaccines... | Vaccine Controversies | Doctor Mike [web streaming video]. USA: Doctor Mike; 2017 Aug 6 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2WtUMvNjzQ>
14. Doctor Mike. What Your Body is Telling Me | Doctor Mike [web streaming video]. USA: Doctor Mike; 2017 Aug 13 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21DMW8hDcso>
15. Doctor Mike. She Asked For Antibiotics & I said NO | Wednesday Checkup [web streaming video]. USA: Doctor Mike; 2019 Apr 3 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whcLEyG81SQ>
16. Mousjid N, Gafni A, Bremond A, Carrere MO. Seeking a second opinion: do patients need a second opinion when practice guidelines exist? *Health Policy*. 2007 Jan 1;80(1):43–50.
17. Pearson SD, Raeke LH. Patients' trust in physicians: many theories, few measures, and little data. *J Gen Intern Med*. 2000 Jul;15(7):509–13.
18. Beckman HB, Markakis KM, Suchman AL, Frankel RM. The doctor-patient relationship and malpractice: lessons from plaintiff depositions. *Arch Intern Med*. 1994 Jun 27;154(12):1365–70.
19. Violin MD. About [Internet]. Canada: Violin MD; 2017 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiamy6DLsjleCgFz8TlXg9Q/about>
20. Violin MD. 26 HOUR CALL SHIFT: Day in the Life of a Doctor, INTENSIVE CARE UNIT [web streaming video]. Canada: Violin MD; 2019 Sept 7 [cited 2019 Oct 3]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1WDF_eTrr0
21. Bonnie RJ, Stroud CE, Breiner HE. Table 7-1: Past-year health care utilization rates by age group: 2009 medical expenditure panel survey. In: Investing in the health and well-being of young adults. National Academies Press; 2014.
22. Farnan JM, Paro JA, Higa J, Edelson J, Arora VM. The YouTube generation: implications for medical professionalism. *Perspect Biol Med*. 2008;51(4):517–24.