Recruiting clinicians to combat pseudoscience on social media

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Dr. Austin Chiang is jumping into uncharted territory. The busy gastroenterologist, who holds the unique role of Chief Medical Social Media Officer at Jefferson Health — with its extensive network of physicians and offices throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey — hopes to harness social media for positive change. His goal? To carve out

clinicians with the Jefferson Health media relations department, and helps to frame social media campaigns. He's hoping his one-of-a-kind job description will soon be the norm. "The very existence of my role supports the notion that social media contributions by clinicians should be encouraged and valued at large academic medical centres," he notes.

he often tackles issues with humour — he is the author of the 2015 bestseller *Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?* — Caulfield is deadly serious about the dangers of standing by while misinformation spreads. "There's been this ongoing tolerance for too long of pseudoscience and we're now starting to see a shift — an acknowledgement that this needs to

be addressed. The medical profession should be leading the charge as a science-informed profession."

He warns that just dumping facts into the great pop-culture churn probably won't change people's minds, which is why it's key to recruit social media-savvy professionals to spread informed messages. "There is evidence to show that if trusted voices do become part of the conversation, they can shift the dialogue. But they have to use creative communications and strategies."

That's what Chiang is aiming for at Jefferson Health, while simultaneously thinking on a much grander scale. He recently established the Association for Healthcare Social Media, a nonprofit aimed at encouraging the creation of a global network of health care practitioners who use social media as an educational tool. The association plans to develop best practices for social media use and create a how-to

guide featuring everything from how to grow audiences to how to maintain a responsible tone. "There are many professional pitfalls in social media," Chiang explains.

Chang believes it's crucial for health professionals to overcome their reticence to engage on social media for the greater goal

Social media-savvy health professionals may never outnumber vocal disseminators of misinformation online but could amplify important health messages to wider audiences.

a voice for legitimate health information in a space filled with memes, pseudoscience and sales skills.

An avid poster across several social media platforms, Chiang has been tasked with encouraging his colleagues to become similarly engaged. He has revised institutional social media policies, links

Chiang's push for engagement is echoed by Timothy Caulfield, a professor in the Faculty of Law and School of Public Health at the University of Alberta, who has made it his mission to debunk the pseudoscience around health and wellness, much of it promoted by celebrities with huge social media followings. Though

of improved health literacy among the general population. “Our patients are exposed to and seeking health knowledge on social media, where there are plenty of individuals without the proper credentials or training making unsubstantiated claims, promoting non-evidence-based remedies, and misinterpreting medical literature,” he says.

And though Chiang’s not so idealistic that he envisions a world where health

professionals on social media outnumber “the numerous vocal disseminators of misinformation,” he believes that if he and his colleagues develop strong voices, they can generate an influencer presence that that will allow them to amplify important messages.

As he settles into his various social media roles, Chiang acknowledges that the battle for hearts and minds online is a

long game but, as recent measles outbreaks have shown, the cost of losing ground to misinformation can be steep. If more health professionals considered social media engagement to be part of their jobs, they might be able to improve online conversations about health care and divert them from pseudoscience.

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