Dr. Brian Vartabedian, pediatric gastroenterologist and author of the blog 33 charts (33charts.com), recently said, “We’ve reached a point where social media is now part of the professional workflow.” I couldn’t agree more.

The world is changing fast and the ways we communicate with patients (and families) and other healthcare professionals is rapidly evolving. We now have patient portals where patients can reach out to ask questions or request medication refills. We can use our electronic medical record systems to discuss a patient’s care with other physicians in a secured environment. Similarly, social media can also be a valuable communication tool for physicians.

With so many platforms to choose from (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, etc.), it can be challenging to know which one might be best for you. This article will focus on the role of Twitter in healthcare social media. There are other venues you can try, but Twitter is one of the easiest to use.

How can you use Twitter in your professional workflow?

1. Keeping up to date about publications or research in your field: Instead of waiting for your medical journal to arrive or for the publisher to email you a Table of Contents, why not follow them on Twitter instead? Blood (@BloodJournal), New England Journal of Medicine (@NEJM), and Nature (@nature), just to name just a few, have very active Twitter accounts. Posts about new publications come straight to your Twitter feed. You can choose either to receive notifications about new posts on your mobile device or tablet or turn off notifications and simply scroll through your feed at your convenience. This can be one of the simplest ways to use social media in your professional life.

2. Medical Conferences: Using Twitter, you can follow medical conferences you are unable to attend from your mobile device. More and more frequently, medical conferences are selecting a Twitter hashtag so participants who tweet (called Tweeps) can link the tweet to that specific conference. The American Society of Hematology (@ash_hematology) has had a hashtag for each annual meeting for more than 5 years. And the number of people (and quantity of tweets) goes up each year. Simply search for the hashtag (#ASH15, for example) and all tweets using this hashtag will be available to you.

3. Dissemination of medical information: Yes, being limited to 140 characters can be tricky. There’s an art to it, but it is a great tool for getting information out quickly to a large audience. I (@sicklecelldoc) tweet about sickle cell disease year round but in September I really rev up the number of tweets as the public interest for information goes up during awareness month. In addition to your own tweets, you can retweet information from other sources like the National Heart, Lung, Blood Institute (@nih_nhlbi), American Society of Hematology (@ash_hematology), the American Academy of Pediatrics (@AmerAcadPeds) or your own
A third way to broadcast information is through a Tweet chat. A Twitter chat is an organized time where a group of Tweeps discuss a specific topic. The chat is usually labeled with a specific hashtag. In general the chats begin with a question and answer period followed by open discussion of the topic. Chair, Jeff Hord has participated in some twitter chats on behalf of the Academy.

Interested, but uncertain where to start? Consider opening a Twitter account and do nothing initially. Start following people you know, professional societies, and institutions. As you spend time reading tweets, you will start to understand what is going on. Concerned about time? It’s not necessary to tweet every day or multiple times a day. You can tweet a couple times per week or focus tweets during medical conferences to help disseminate new research information. Branching out into healthcare social media (#hcsm) can be scary but no worries, come on in, the water is fine.

**Resources:**